

THE FOX WOMAN

BY NALBRO BARTLEY



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"Brownie" Son

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BY
NALBRO BARTLEY



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CHAPTER I

INTO their old-fashioned sitting-room at the Hotel Lenox—old-fashioned despite its luxurious heat from a new hot-air furnace and gas-equipped chandeliers—stole Millard Ames's seven-year-old daughter, Stanley. Usually she dashed into the room to hide in a corner and call upon her father to come find her. Having been discovered, she would pounce upon him, ruffling his dignified self with ruthless intimacy.

Today, she tip-toed across the deep-piled carpet with its suffocating odor of anthracite to pause before the cage of Perk, her pet canary.

“He is *mine*,” Stanley told herself in self-justification. She pushed an ottoman underneath the cage and climbed upon it.

The top of Stanley's bonnet was on a level with the floor of Perk's cage. Perk and his gilt-barred house bore the same indefinable air of neglect that there was about Stanley's picturesque little self—about the entire suite, as a matter of fact. Only Millard Ames remained well-groomed, which was the way with a widower, so the gossips murmured.

Peering up at Perk's bright-eyed self, chirping in apprehensive greeting, pausing to peck nervously at the ragged bit of apple thrust edgewise in the bars, Stanley drew a deep determined breath.

"I always want what is mine," she announced in her sweet voice. As her hand rattled the cage latch, Perk scuttled into a corner.

She broke open the fragile gate to reach about the sanded floor until her fingers clutched the fluff of feathers. Many thoughts passed through her busy brain.

Foremost was a joy of possession, *per se*, a triumphant thrill at his capture. "Nice Perk—just love ME," she commanded as she caressed him. "Nice Perk—sing for ME," her hand gripping Perk's body until the eyes closed and his head sagged over her thumb. "Nice Perk—gone to sleep," her lips kissing the suffocated bird.

She wondered if there would be a similar joy in possessing greater things than Perk. This would be when she was grown up and wore chignons and waterfalls, danced the polka until midnight and ate as much ice-cream as she desired and not as much as Tante Aydelotte persuaded her father was proper for her. She resented Tante Aydelotte. Tante was not hers. Nor did Tante have any claim upon Stanley's handsome father, whom she refused to share with anyone. She would die rather than endure a second mother. She was content to hear about her lovely, dead mother who would have been so tender of her; this mother who watched over her from some heavenly lookout, personified by a twinkling star her father pointed out from time to time. This was all very well, since it allowed Stanley a clear field for action. Sometimes she found herself wondering how it would have been if this beautiful mother, for whom her father still grieved, had lived and she herself had been but a unit

in a family instead of an imperious little ruler. As nearly as Stanley could express herself she was not consciously glad that this mother had died when she was born, but she felt that one managed nicely without her.

A number of overly affectionate ladies in creaking moire and lace tabs would have essayed the rôle of a successor . . . small wonder, Stanley thought. No one else in the world was as wonderful as her father—not even God! She enjoyed this secret opinion since she realized that it would have been considered blasphemy. She strove to possess this father as she now possessed this gay-feathered chorister whom her father had bought a week ago and whom Tante had protested against letting loose in the room.

“Stanley wants him to perch on her shoulder, take seeds from between her lips,” her father had explained when Tante advocated Perk’s staying in his cage.

“She is too small to know how to treat him,” Tante insisted. “If she harms him she will be heart-broken. You can talk to him in his cage quite as well——”

“Better let him alone, darling,” said her father persuasively, catching her up in his arms.

“But he is mine.” Stanley knew no compromise.

“All yours,” he hastened to assure her.

“And you are all mine,” she added as he had swung her into the air.

“All yours, ladybird,” kissing her before he set her down.

Stanley merely bided her time. She intended holding Perk just as her father had held her. Tante seemed nothing but a meddlesome, plain-faced woman

with penetrating gray eyes and a flattish, shiny nose. Because she had been her mother's best friend was no reason to intrude herself upon Stanley—honest, faithful Tante who was considered "advanced" in the year 1878, who actually had tea every afternoon as they did in England, talked for woman's rights and mentioned divorce without lowering her voice. Only Tante's social background as Judge Aydelotte's daughter assured her welcome in Dalefield's inner circle. Tante's friends defended her by saying that "Maggie Aydelotte had loved but two persons in her life, Helen Stanley and the man she married—Millard Ames." Since she had given Helen up to Millard Ames, and later, realized that Millard Ames had given himself up to his daughter, there was nothing for a nature like Miss Aydelotte's but to become a mutual friend, the sort who did not flinch at any issue. When Ames was left widowed and with a new-born child, she put aside personal grief and set about reestablishing him in a hotel suite, with a black mammy for Stanley and herself—renamed Tante—as self-appointed overseer and secretary.

As the black mammy had bowed to Stanley's will after the fashion of Stanley's father, Tante had come to realize that she must be content with crumbs—not those left by her dead friend, but by her friend's emotional little daughter.

"Mine," Stanley had announced as soon as she could speak. "Daddy all mine."

At six Stanley selected her own clothes; as she stood holding her dead pet on this winter afternoon she presented her customary pathetic appearance.

Her black satin dress with its red chenille fringe,

her giddy little boots with shining copper toes, the silk stockings betraying streaks from ineffective laundering, the heavy gold locket and chain about her thin neck, and bonnet of red velvet and tassels—all these bespoke the motherless child and the indulgent father. Rings flashed from the small, not too clean fingers. She “smelled sweet,” as she called it—an overpowering odor of lily-of-the-valley perfume—but there was room for improvement in the brushing of her yellow hair.

The sitting-room presented a lavish, careless appearance corresponding to Stanley herself. Books and papers were strewn hit-and-miss, fancy pillows and worn easy chairs, gas droplights with ruffled silk shades like ballet dancers’ costumes, punctuated the long, high-ceilinged apartment. A dish of bonbons and another of fruit and nuts untidily centered a marble-topped table. A huge china clock—like blue whipped cream, Stanley described it—stood in idleness on a mantel overweighted with Stanley’s dolls and games and her father’s field glasses and cigars. Her mother’s piano stood closed and dusty, scratches on its rosewood case. The alcove where Ames slept was an austere affair. The wardrobe door of Stanley’s nursery was ajar and there fluttered into the room the suggestion of many-hued frocks and pelisses, a set of fitch furs, the tippet torn and the muff hanging by a string. In the room proper was Stanley’s canopied Empire bed—suitable for a belle, Tante thought, every time she saw it. There was a once elaborate toilet case with gold-backed brushes and gold-topped bottles, a book-case crowded with shabby volumes. The game table was a confusion of remnants of everything from

parchesi to a set of soldiers—for there was something tomboyish about Stanley despite her yellow curls and those elongated green eyes which sparkled like peridots whenever she was pleased. The entire place was an emphatic statement that: Stanley rules here! Hands off, good ladies.

“He’ll buy her a watch for Christmas,” the hotel employees were hazarding.

“Miss Aydelotte will take it away from her,” someone suggested.

“She’ll take Miss Aydelotte away from the watch,” someone else refuted.

Without warning the door opened to admit Tante. She wore a severe alpaca with regiments of shining little buttons. Her hat was a mediocre affair, slipping off one ear just as Tante had hastily adjusted it after hearing the concert of Campanini’s golden voice. She felt that she ought to drop in at the hotel to see if Stanley was upstairs—of late there had been a tendency to parade in the lobby while waiting for her father’s return.

Tante approached the ottoman with its defiant, triumphant culprit.

“He is dead,” she said solemnly, her finger touching Perk’s limp head. “What were you trying to do?”

“I only wanted to love him but not until it hurt,” protested Stanley vehemently.

“Stanley,” demanded Tante in her sternest of voices, “do you think that loving anyone ought to cause pain?”

Stanley shrugged her shoulders; at seven she was an opportunist.

"It would hurt if you didn't love me," turning the reverse side of the shield.

Tante hesitated. Already she had divined that whoever crossed Stanley's emotional path was liable to be loved until he was hurt. "Nothing will bring Perk back," she said sadly.

Stanley gazed curiously at Perk's body. "It was mine," was her sole defense. "Father gave him to me; he said that Perk was mine. You put him into a cage. I wanted him close to me, close! If you hadn't put him into a cage, I could have trained him," with a stamp of her foot to emphasize the statement.

Tante was disarmed. "This will grieve your father," she said as a final argument.

"He will buy me another when he sees how sad I am," was Stanley's retort. "I'll never put another bird in a cage—"

"We must bury poor Perk," Tante announced.

"Don't like to put things into the ground." Stanley's underlip quivered.

Tante was unable to refrain from further comment. "But you killed Perk! You are a selfish little girl. You're growing older—you could help your father so much more by being unselfish and not trying to have your own way—"

"I want another Perk," Stanley announced, her eyes clear and shining. "A Perk with little black feathers in his wings—"

Tante was dismayed. "Stanley," she began in her most formidable of voices.

Here Millard Ames arrived to interrupt the sermon. Stanley had flung herself into his arms. She was

sobbing, soft little sounds that did not interfere with her whispers that she had loved poor little Perk to death and Tante was angry; Tante was terrible when angered, she said horrid things and Stanley was so tired and sorry. She had only meant to love what was her own—he understood? He would not scold? Might she stay down for dinner tonight because mammy had gone out? She would be as quiet as a mouse, she would sit beside him and nibble a stray nut or raisin if only he would let her stay down. She was so lonesome now that Perk was not there to chirp and sing . . . wasn't there a bird heaven?

Tante turned away in scornful defeat. Every atom of Tante's honest being was stirred to wrath as she watched Ames's head bend close to Stanley's and his musical voice assure her that he understood. Of course there was a bird heaven—true, she had been naughty to disobey, but he understood; she was always his precious little daughter!

The next day Tante called at Ames's law office to give an accounting of some bills she had for Stanley.

"You are ruining your girl," she said in abrupt warning. "Just as surely as she has ruined you."

Ames frowned. Tante's visit had somewhat the same effect as a cold morning tub, invigorating and sensible but not always welcome. "I wish you wouldn't jump to conclusions about a seven-year-old-child," he began.

"I don't—I've fairly crawled to them," Tante corrected.

"Well—what is it now? Because she smothered a bird in her craving for its intimate affection, must I send her to Coventry?" At times Ames was impatient

under Tante's friendship. Instinctively he recognized that she was right and that he was weak. There was something about Stanley that he could not gainsay—something so persuasive yet determined that he found himself yielding to her slightest request, allowing business to go by the board more often than not, taking her with him on unsuitable business trips, to the theater and opera, letting her keep her own hours even as she selected her own clothes.

"She is all I have," was his defense. "And she grows more like her mother each day." He walked to the nearest window. It was a dignified old room; it had been the office of his father and grandfather before him. Dalefield spoke of Millard Ames in an accepted, affectionate tone. Old families relied upon his counsel. That he was neither aggressive nor progressive was not to his discredit. Moreover, he was heartbroken; in those days this was an ample alibi for a man's wan-
ing ambition. To sum it up: he was Millard Ames, gentleman, first, last and for all time. There was no reason to exert himself in the commercial field.

"Outwardly like Helen," corrected Tante, the color flooding her square-jawed face. It was an effort to say that she did not think of Stanley as Ames would have wished her to do. It meant destroying the last vestige of hope of becoming his wife. To be accepted by Ames one must worship Ames's daughter; well she knew the formula!

"Explain," wheeling about, a note of protest in his voice.

"You may never forgive me if I tell you what I have decided as to Stanley."

"Try me," pausing before the mantel, his long,

tapering fingers tapping impatiently on its marble surface.

"She's a tiny fox woman," Tante diagnosed without flinching. "I've been reading fairy-tales to her. One of them was the legend of a Japanese fox god. The fox god who changes himself into a beautiful woman and apparently comes to the rescue whenever trouble threatens or a boon is asked . . . but really, she is searching for thrills! It's the best simile I've come upon for Stanley. The fox woman has a clever heart but the good she does never outweighs the evil she causes. She will bide her time to have her own way. Apparently she may be maligned, even self-sacrificing, but she turns events to her liking or else escapes from distasteful situations. She so dominates and maneuvers the lives of those about her yet remaining the innocent, misunderstood individual, that she escapes dénouements. Her aim is to have power—and to be amused . . . I wonder why I'm fool enough to be quite so honest. Fairy-tales seldom have that effect! But as I read Stanley the story I could not help but think of her seven remarkable little years, the way you let her govern you to the loss of your business and your friends. I'm prepared to have you hate me. Stanley does because she's afraid I might usurp something of your affection. Now, I never will." Tante was carried out of herself, her tall, spare figure pacing the law office and turning at either end as abruptly as Ames had done. "I loved your wife . . . I've loved you," she said with unexpected candor. "I wanted to love your child—but she's a fox woman. Even now she is planning for another Perk—to love until it hurts."

"Ridiculous!" Ames interrupted indignantly. "To use your splendid brain for nothing better than to indite a motherless, sensitive child, to quote claptrap legends to substantiate your unfair suspicions—why, Tante," coming over and taking her hands in his. "Of course you loved Helen, you love me—and you love Stanley. The child adores you—oh, but she does."

"She makes you think so," Tante corrected, shaking her head vehemently. "I've told my one secret . . . I love you, Millard. I'm content to serve you. I know I'm absurd when I try to think of romance. I'm not the sort men fall in love with—but I want you to forge ahead as Helen wanted you to do. You mustn't stay on in a hotel with a little tyrant running wild among servants and gossips. You're being cruel to both of you."

"The night her mother died," said Ames suddenly, "they put the child in my arms for consolation. We had wanted a boy—he was to be Stanley. So I named her. As I held her that first time I dedicated my life to that child. I'm not angry with you, Tante. Probably a dozen women are saying something along the same lines, but it falls on deaf ears. Stanley is different from anyone else in the world, set apart——"

"Be practical then, equip her for life," urged Tante. Now that she was in it she was out to finish her say. "Wouldn't Helen grieve at her tantrums, her untidiness, her tyranny?"

"No doubt, no doubt—but she'll be better equipped for life by love than by the discipline you would mete out. Do you realize that Stanley is terrorized lest I die and leave her? She loves me with an unearthly sort of devotion;—at times it is almost a burden, I'll admit.

I believe that she was marked with desolation and terror; she's never been mothered—I've that to make up to her . . ." Abruptly, he turned away.

Tante rose and tied her cape. "I'm a well-meaning fool," she announced to no one in particular. "I'll still do the mending and try to keep down the bills . . . but I'll hold my tongue." She was gone before Ames could answer.

The next time Tante came into Ames's apartment she found a black-winged canary singing gaily, perching first on the bookcase and next on Stanley's outstretched finger, finally flying to land in the midst of Tante's bonnet only to escape with a shrill, disdainful chirp.

"You see, Tante," said Stanley. "My dear father did bring me another Perk—and let him be ALL mine."

CHAPTER II

WHEN Stanley was twelve Ames's law practise had noticeably declined. He rented half of his office and remained at home many mornings in the week. A mental lethargy seemed to have settled over him. The black mammy was a thing of the past. Stanley had a day governess, a pale-faced, anemic person who was given to head colds and a terror of the pet spaniel.

Tante Aydelotte was "out West"—Cleveland, no less—visiting cousins and teaching part time in a young ladies' seminary. Dalefield credited it to Tante's having been humiliated at not marrying Millard Ames.

Stanley had grown slender and oval-faced. Her piquant features were as clear-cut as those in a cameo. There were dimples in strategic and out-of-the-way places in her cheeks and chin, and her hair was a soft halo bound with velvet ribbons. When someone told her that she looked fifteen she wrote in her diary:

"I have become a woman. My darling father does not realize this. I shall have him take me abroad—I do not believe that I wish an American husband."

Against everyone's advice, Ames took Stanley to France in the spring. Unbeknown to his partners he sold securities in order to afford the trip. He had begun gambling in secret, regaining his former buoyancy whenever he won and becoming morose as luck deserted him. He was no longer counted an eligible—

but a character. When Stanley and her father appeared at the theater or in the hotel dining-room, someone would whisper: "There is poor Lawyer Ames and his spoiled child; my dear, she is not thirteen, but never been in school a day of her life . . . knows more about some things than our grandmothers, I dare say . . . he lives only to please her."

They returned from Europe the month after Stanley was fifteen. In the interim Ames's practise had become a myth and the Hotel Lenox a shabby affair. Tante Aydelotte had become an educator in her small way. From the Cleveland seminary she had come east to a Connecticut finishing school where her word was respected despite her tirades against corsets and her shocking habit of smoking cigarettes!

Two years abroad had made Ames an affable weakling with an absurd pride in his young daughter. At fifteen Stanley boasted of a proposal of marriage, a wealth of golden hair and the ability to execute fancy dances in a manner equal to that of a professional. She had become a sparkling little cosmopolitan. She never questioned her father's income—"Papa was comfortable" was Stanley's deep-rooted conviction, and if she pouted effectively when he was obliged to refuse something upon which she had set her heart, she never pressed the issue. Stanley was satisfied that her father was her slave; any terrors as to a second mother were well over. She now focused her thoughts upon a husband. He must be handsome, rich, talented, and as devoted and deluded as her father who was to live with them for always. They must travel a great deal, and have a brownstone-front house in New York and perhaps a country place in the Berkshire towns where the

old families were building. Thus established, Stanley felt that she would enjoy life to its fullest. She wished for one child—a son. She was rather keen to see Tante Aydelotte in order to patronize her magnanimously. Besides, there was no one else to see. Friends had been no part of Stanley's scheme. Throughout her domination she had succeeded in crowding them from her father's life as well. Beyond business connections he had lost touch with his own generation. Stanley had never known hers but she flattered herself that she knew life! She was possessed of an odd streak of wanting to remain aloof—to be able to say to one or two individuals: "You are *mine*—you must give up all else and come with me." General popularity was a thing which never concerned her. She was a monogamist as well as a tyrant. Hers was a masculine mind with keen feminine intuitions. Just as she reveled in beauty and was, herself, a thing of motion and loveliness, so she reveled in power, in any game of playing politics to bring about the desired result.

"There is nothing that I could not do—if I really set about it," she naïvely confessed in her secret diary.

She took efficient care of her father, for there was a natural efficiency in all that she did. She read to him and mended for him, regulated his diet, saw that he took spring tonics, and went for daily walks clinging to his arm.

In European resorts she had been the subject of many controversies. Where one argued for her poise and sophistication another argued against her conceit and precociousness; some voted that she was pathetic and to be pitied, others perhaps glimpsed Tante's verdict. But everyone admired her!

In the autumn of 1886, Stanley was fifteen and wearing a diamond to emphasize her maturity. Life seemed settled and serene and she was about to begin her quest for a husband when fate intervened.

Returning from a dancing class with a new admirer and the knowledge that she was without a rival as regarded the latest step, Stanley came into their hotel rooms humming under her breath. She must hint of her future plans to her father. As soon as they had dined, she should tell him something of what she had decided.

As she lit the gas droplight nearest the door, she saw her dog, Trooper, crouching beside a couch. He lifted his head and gave a long, telltale howl as if to break the news before she came slowly across the room. On the couch was her father's body. He must have been dead for several hours—a heart lesion was diagnosed later.

After the first dramatic grief, Stanley reordered her small world and was not unmindful that she looked well in black. A brunette in mourning must be a trial, she thought as she waited for Tante's verdict as to her future. Sitting in the partially dismantled sitting-room, peering sidewise into the mirror to view her somber little self, her yellow hair bound with black satin ribbons and a carved ivory pendant on a black chain as a redeeming note, she felt that it would have been easier to have lost this beloved father if she had already found the ideal husband of her dreams, to have been able to lean upon the latter—an admirable background for her grief. There had been something incomplete in her father's quiet funeral, the morbid curiosity of strangers, the temporary generosity of one-time friends. From the moment that the news was broken

to her Stanley was conscious that she could have been a more outstanding figure.

However, she made the most of the rôle. She found herself wondering with a nauseating sense of shame as to where this "play-acting" left off and sincere emotion began. It was so easy to sob and shiver, to be fragile-looking, to answer in trembling monosyllables, even to come into Tante's arms as if she longed to do so or cared whether the arms were there for that matter.

Now the ten-day wonder was over. Someone else had been found dead or had run off with someone else's wife; Millard Ames was scarcely mentioned. His estate was found to be nothing more than a remnant. There was no reason for Stanley's tarrying in a hotel suite which she could not afford; although polite, the hotel manager was anxious. The shopkeepers who had supplied her mourning were keen in pressing their bills, the undertaker—there was no end to the list of vultures, Stanley thought as she awaited Tante's decision. After all, she had been obliged to fall back upon Tante. One actually disliked the person to whom one was too grateful, she thought, taking a secret delight in Tante's broad, shiny nose and the unbecoming wrinkles of her high forehead. Tante was growing old, she thought—a generous feeling following this thought. One could afford to be kind to old persons—just as one could pamper pets. They were not in today's arena, not liable to tangle up one's destiny.

Out of the several disappointed ladies who would have married her father years ago, Tante alone stood by the fort in time of need. Tante saw to the practical details which attend any death and any breaking up. She was prepared to arrange for Stanley's future.

Fifteen was too young to be left alone, Stanley realized as she gripped the sash of her dress with tense fingers. Her father should not have died until she was eighteen—by then she would have found her Prince Charming and she could have spared her father. The hint of what the impersonal world could mean had come to her during the last few days.

“Your father’s business was deplorably neglected,” Tante was saying, “but we won’t take that up just now. There is barely enough to pay the bills and leave you a tiny nest-egg—I can’t see what Millard was thinking of. You must begin to be a normal girl, live simply like other girls of your age, realize that you have only yourself to depend upon—”

“Who has been appointed my guardian?” Stanley interrupted.

“I have been,” said Tante. “Your father wished it to be so.”

Stanley started to protest but thought better of it. Instead she whispered something to the effect that she hoped Tante would not mind the responsibility.

“It is not the responsibility that worries me but whether I can help you,” Tante said bluntly. “You must go away to school, my dear—the fall term has only just begun. I shall take you back to where I am teaching—”

“I won’t go to boarding-school,” began Stanley in cool, low tones.

“Until you are eighteen you must do as I say,” Tante informed her. “You have been hopelessly indulged . . . but we won’t go into that, either. For now you must go to school.”

“I’ll do anything but go to boarding-school; I’ll be a

nursemaid," was the protest. "Or I'll get married. There was an English boy in Lausanne——"

"Don't be silly." Tante was relieved that she had broken the worst of the news. "You must come back to school with me. You can be very happy if you choose. You will have an opportunity to become normal. In time we may become friends—real friends," putting her hand on Stanley's shoulder.

Stanley winced.

"You are all that I have left of them," Tante whispered, her lips touching the halo-like hair.

Stanley brightened. This emotional remark was encouraging; she might still have the whip-hand. Romance, sentiment, loyalty, whatever one liked to name it, clouded Tante's vision.

"You'll never leave me?" Stanley felt it opportune to ask as Tante's arm stole around her possessively.

"Never, Stanley. He left you to me—I'll do my best for you; I'll share to the last."

Stanley glanced sidewise at Tante's awkward figure—one of her great thick walking boots protruding as she half knelt, half leaned beside Stanley's chair. "What an unselfish old simpleton," she found herself thinking. Then followed a sudden return of grief—the contrast of this woman with her handsome father: eager to humor her moods, indulge her whims, these rooms with the traces of his belongings, her own extravagant accessories. What an unreal life they had led, these happy, carefree two! What an unreal person she was! How could she go to a boarding-school with Tante as one of the mistresses, rise at the ringing of a bell and go to sleep at the ringing of another, simper at the same jests of pupils and teachers, go walking in

a prim line, wear a blue hair bow on Sundays and a black one on week-days? Bah, she hated the very thought of it—three years of namby-pamby monotony . . . yet she was penniless and only fifteen, quite alone save for this strangely loyal soul . . . she must make the best of it. One cannot always remain fifteen. And she had been born with the wisdom of fifty, she complimented herself as she preened her little neck to look over and beyond Tante into the pier glass. When she was eighteen . . .

Tante was chattering as to prosaic details. The needed name tapes for her underthings, the unsuitability of most of her frocks, a detailed description of the schoolrooms, the pupils . . . would she never finish? Domestic science was included in the course. Tante approved of this; she would have added a number of new and experimental courses. There was certain to be a greater sphere for woman's talents than ever before; some day they would be given the ballot—Stanley's children might live to see it. Stanley's children! The phrase brought a strange flash of resentment. As if she was going to marry any nice but small-incomed young man who would expect her to cook his breakfast and mend his clothes and bear him children—and consider herself privileged! She was out to prove that one person in action can comprise a drama.

"Dear Tante," she said, kissing one of Tante's weatherbeaten cheeks, "she wants to make a woman of it, doesn't she?"

"Dear little Stanley," Tante was rather carried out of herself for the moment.

That evening after Tante had gone to her Dickens

reading club, Stanley stole downstairs and ordered a cab to take her to one Lee Van Zile who lived in an imposing red brick, landscaped mansion perched on Dalefield's proudest hill. Mrs. Van Zile was a timid, obese female with an asthmatic voice, several blue teeth and a childish conception of a personal God. Secretly, she had conceived of His having snowy side-whiskers and features not unlike her favorite pastor. Van Zile was considered Dalefield's richest citizen, his friendship for Millard Ames having been demonstrated by paying a handsome sum towards the funeral expenses, a sum represented as having been part of Ames's estate.

He was a thick-set, stocky man with a mauve-tinted nose, although of temperate habits, mustachios like flying seagulls and features like a stub pen. He was self-made and self-satisfied. A year or two younger than Stanley's father, who had been forty when he died, Van Zile was one of those individuals who had seemed old at thirty, just as his wife was antiquated at twenty-five. He enjoyed his wealth and local prominence in a thoroughly unaffected way; his was a childish delight in being known for nine-course dinners, whist smokers and the fact that every year he took his wife and her maiden sister, Miss Hattie, to spend eight stupid expensive weeks at the Delaware Water Gap.

When Stanley stole into his pompous, deer-headed and trout-mounted hallway and waited until he came out to see her, having left the annual entertainment of one of his clubs to do so, she found herself wondering how his wife could endure him. However, he was Dalefield's richest man and a Connecticut boarding-

school was imminent—three subservient years with Tante at the helm.

But Lee Van Zile did not solve her problem. He was pleased that Millard Ames's daughter should seek him out for advice—but there was nothing to do but obey Miss Aydelotte. Miss Aydelotte's delicate generosity had saved the day—had Stanley never suspected it? She must be a good child and apply herself to her studies—what an exquisite little thing she was, he thought as he talked. (He had been at the seventh course of the club dinner and was in a most genial frame of mind.) Mrs. Van Zile, who hovered about the upper landing, had an impulse to discover who this visitor might be; but previous experiences caused her to remain upstairs hugging an old kiss-me-quick about her shoulders, Miss Hattie convincing her that being married to Dalefield's richest man was compensation for everything.

Stanley bridled at his compliments. She was like Christine Gerstner, Van Zile insisted. (Miss Gerstner had just given a local concert.) Had no one else commented upon the resemblance? He only wished that he had a fifteen-year-old daughter, glancing about the ornate hall as if to indicate all that his daughter might enjoy were she a reality. Stanley must always count him as her friend. He would see her into her carriage. Young girls could not afford to be out alone at such hours.

Long after Stanley had forgotten Van Zile's bulky pomposity, he remembered the appealing picture she had made and sent Tante another check to prove that he remembered Millard Ames after his obituary was forgotten.

Convinced herself of the actual state of affairs, Stanley cried a little, pouted a great deal and then prepared to make Miss Masters's Seminary for Young Ladies her Mecca. She rather deceived Tante until they had reached Miss Masters's and Stanley found herself no longer an individual but a half-pay pupil. Then swords replaced the stars in her bright eyes.

"I hate it," she said in a vehement outburst—at fifteen one cannot pose beyond a certain point. "I won't get-up early and eat scorched porridge and say prayers and walk and study and mend and scrub—I wish that I had eloped with anyone . . . I won't apply myself." And she had had herself taken to the infirmary on the plea of illness which won her the personal attention of Miss Masters herself.

Stanley saw how to flatter this lady. The visit had ended by Miss Masters upbraiding Tante for not understanding sensitive and bereaved natures, and Tante protesting until Miss Masters regretted having taken this "advanced female" into her faculty.

If there were rules to follow Stanley soon found their exceptions. She did this so diligently that one became uncertain as to just which she was obeying. Her wardrobe being limited, she made a pathetic appeal in her mourning frocks. If she had Tante to thank for tuition and pin money she delighted in turning her thanks into sarcastic comments which kept Tante far afield. And if the desire to dominate, "to love someone until it hurt," asserted itself she found her wish granted in the "head girl," Donna Lovell.

It was still the vogue to be delicate. Since Stanley could not be exploited as an heiress, she must play the rôle of fragile heroine. This was not without compen-

sations. There were several muddy-skinned, stodgy heiresses whom Stanley could not bring herself to envy. In her thin black frock, her yellow hair interlaced with black ribbons so as to give the effect of a silhouette against candlelight, her small, straight figure, her piquant face with its solemn green eyes looking at one in appeal—there was small chance of Stanley not being counted a heroine.

Donna Lovell possessed a maternal nature as well as a dramatic instinct. She was a tall, well-built girl with a flair for athletics, wearing closely fitting jerseys and bright-colored tams, disregarding the admonitions as to chapped hands and reddened nose. Donna was a heroine herself in a small way. The daughter of well-known actors, both dead, Donna had been virtually adopted by half of New York's theatrical profession. One sponsored her attendance at the school. A manager had promised her a part when she should graduate. Mary Dealey, proprietress of a professional boarding-house on Gramercy Park, called a cozy sky-bedroom "Donna's den." Here Donna was one of the family of itinerant professionals who either paid Mary Dealey in advance as proof of their goodwill or stood her off with extravagant excuses.

As a baby Donna had been carried on the stage—it was an old melodrama, *Under the Gaslight*, in which her mother played the lead. From the first Donna had been set aside as a tragedienne; an American Duse, one veteran had gone far enough to prophesy. Her contralto voice (like an organ played at twilight, so Stanley whispered), her great dark eyes, her sallow skin and almost Roman features—all these

indicated that Donna could interpret rôles which most actresses shun because of inability.

In those days an actress was still spoken of with suspicion. Society had not yet extended a greeting over the footlights; occasionally a musical favorite eloped with an earl's son or fascinated a middle-aged millionaire. In the school, Donna was regarded as a curiosity rather than an asset. Her boyish manner had discounted from the first any theory of affectation which curious girls associated with actresses. Some called her "that artistic tomboy" until Donna invited the originator of the description out for a snowball fight which ended in face-washing, tears, victory! After her second year she was acclaimed a favorite. In years to come she was certain to be an honor guest at class reunions.

In her junior year—the year in which Stanley first appeared at Miss Masters's, Donna had the added distinction of being "nearly engaged." The faculty's effort to discount any such rumor failed when there arrived within the scared and sacred seminary precincts one Blair Britton, a young Westerner now co-starring in a Broadway society drama.

Upon investigation it developed that Britton, who had been befriended by Donna's parents, was slightly her senior, a fascinating, high-strung person attracted to Donna's wholesome, boyish self. He was not altogether unaware of the havoc he had created at the sedate little school. Donna would need someone to protect her once she began her stage career. He believed in her career. Besides, he needed Donna. Therefore, he must be in love! Bored with the painted favorites

whom he wooed nightly, influenced by the atmosphere of Mary Dealey's tales of the Lovells and their little daughter, Blair considered himself Donna's self-appointed knight. He was boyishly chivalric in his impulsive proposal. Perhaps he felt that Donna possessed the stability which he lacked, she was so clear-cut and straight-ahead, worlds removed from and above the atmosphere which sometimes had tried to claim Blair for its own.

"I want you, Donna," he had pleaded, not in the impassioned tones of the Broadway favorite but with a wistful sincerity.

"Quite sure about it, Blair?" Donna insisted. Already she adored this handsome young actor with a future, even if he made her feel awkward—as if her hands and feet were oversize and she were a slightly elephantine creature with a bass voice, someone who must care for Blair, advise him, befriend him but not be loved by him.

"As sure as it's safe to be in this world, I'll be deaf to No. We must pull together always—always," and he had looked into her dark, eager eyes with a feeling of joy somehow tinged with shame, as if he knew that Donna was the stronger, the finer, fearing lest she find his weakness out, discover those dark, shamed spots of a man's life. Even so, she would forgive, he told himself—and in adolescent surrender laid his brown head on her shoulder. Kissing him timidly, anything but the boyish Donna, he told himself that he must consider himself a fortunate man.

They agreed to count it "almost an engagement" until Donna finished school. In the summer she was to try her luck with a Brooklyn stock company while Blair

went to London, no less, for his first engagement. While these eager, untried two suffered the pangs of separation, Blair's return would mean the announcement of their engagement and that Donna should wear his ring. As soon as she graduated they would marry and live at Mary Dealey's. Their honeymoon would be spent in Donna's rehearsal of her first real part and Blair's continuing to make love to the leading lady of forty-odd whose hypocritical cheeks he longed to smack in the midst of his impassioned outbursts. Later, they might star together in Shakespeare as Donna's parents had done; they might build a country home in Westchester for summers; there would be children—"lots of 'em" Donna sang out in jubilant prophecy. "I won't give tuppence for the stage as long as I have my children . . . just now little Stanley Ames is my child."

She was eager to prove this last to Blair. In the early morning routine—Donna and Stanley being assigned the rôle of milk-can cleaners—Donna whispered these secrets while Stanley declared herself as being overjoyed. Nothing could make her happier by reflection than Donna's happiness—to be engaged, and to a matinée idol . . . could life offer more? (Had he private means, Stanley found herself thinking as she clattered the tins about while Donna scrubbed them.) She hoped that he was good enough for Donna—not that anyone ever could be—but what would she, Stanley, do—if Donna married and went on the stage, experiencing a wonderful life far removed from a penniless orphan's existence with a mere Tante dragon to call her friend? She almost wished that she had never met Donna, to love and renounce

was too much to ask; she had lost her father, that scar would never heal. She was so alone, beset with nameless fears—did Donna understand?

Donna abandoned the milk tins to take Stanley in her arms, promising all the extravagant impossibilities which only two imaginative girls in a finishing school some forty years ago could have promised.

A few months later Blair arrived to give an evening of selected readings, his tongue in his cheek if the truth were known. At this event the forty-nine pupils and seven faculty members, as well as the peeking-through-a-crack cook and her assistants, listened in wondering admiration, casting envious glances at Donna, who looked more than usually regal in her red cashmere dress cut square at the neck, her thick black hair wound round her head in heavy plaits.

Everyone save Stanley attended the reading. To Donna's disappointment a convenient attack of neuralgia placed Stanley in the infirmary, not only releasing her from a dreadful mathematics examination but from seeing Donna's fiancé. She was not ready to see him, she explained to her flickering conscience, rather wondering at this reaction. What tantalizing yet imperative urge was this concerning Donna's betrothed? What made her rise and steal down the curved stairs of the front hall to peer unnoticed upon the reading, to watch Blair's attractive self as he recited Meredith's "Aux Italins," while every member of the audience envied Donna with all her heart? Stanley noted carefully his gray-blue eyes with heavy, even brows, the bright brown hair carelessly parted at one side, that bronzed complexion suggesting the out-of-doors rather than the greenroom.

"Not altogether reliable; his mouth is too temperamental," she analyzed. "Yet he could be superstrong for an instant! He *is* a dear. I love the way he smiles . . . Donna seems more than ever the brunette cow—in red, of all colors! Poor Tante fairly drools with admiration. Of course he would read 'St. Anges' Eve'—he'd love the beauty of the poem and forget being bored to tears with the listeners. I'd love to be in pink tulle and meet him in a ballroom, whirl about in his arms, waltzing and waltzing until it was dawn . . . he'd not think of Donna then." She prepared to steal back to her room, hating herself for her desires, yet halfway plotting to bring them to pass. A loose carpet tread caused her to trip. A stumble and she went flying down the stairs in undignified guilt—the school rushing to the scene of action, Blair in the lead.

"It's Stanley," came a chorus of astonished voices. "But she was ill—in the infirmary——"

Stanley lost no time in playing her first part. Beside herself with embarrassment, color flooding into her cheeks, such a furious blush of rage that it would be useless to feign a faint, she held out her arms to Blair and said in a weak, sweet voice, "Father dear—I've looked for you everywhere——"

Tenderly Blair picked her up. "Delirious, poor little thing," he said as Miss Masters and Tante and Donna pressed close beside him. Even in the crisis of the moment and the embarrassing knowledge that she wore a wudgy dressing-gown and that her hair was stringy, she told herself that she had been able to divert Blair's attention despite poetry and the female seminary. For the moment she was supreme; he pitied

her. In comparison, could Donna lay claim to being an actress?

"Shall I sing to you, daddy?" humming a gay French song which had been, in truth, her father's favorite.

A sympathetic hush came over the seminary. Blair started towards the stairs. "Let me take her back," he said. Then to Stanley, "Yes, my dear, it's all right—I'm here—do sing—"

Donna followed, her feet making a trifle too loud a sound beside Blair's softened tread. Odd that both he and Stanley made mental note of it. Blair was wondering what this girl's eyes were like for she had kept them closed. How tiny she was—how yellow her hair. She still fancied that he was her father, for her hands patted his coat sleeve, her voice grew softer, and as he laid her in the infirmary bed, she drifted into sleep.

"I'll stay with her, poor darling," volunteered Donna. "Go down and finish, Blair."

Reluctantly, Blair obeyed.

He left on a midnight train. As he was being whirled back to town, his thoughts were not of Donna who loved him so frankly that it was a trifle disconcerting but of this fair-haired, delirious girl who had tumbled pathetically into the midst of his programme and had clung to him until he gently disengaged her hands. . . . no wonder Donna said that Stanley was like her child!

The school physician could find little the matter with Miss Ames but recommended rest and a few huge pills to be taken as a matter of precedent. Secure in the infirmary, Stanley sipped broth with a pensive air. No one suspected that she had decided upon a definite plan of action. Instead of chagrin at her tumble, she

felt it a personal triumph. "Donna may be talented but I am a genius," she actually told herself. "If I could fool everyone at the seminary I can have my name in lights before a theater." Again she consoled herself with the thought that despite her uncurled hair she had been able to deceive one of Broadway's favorites. He had interpreted her murmurings as sincere when the unlovely truth was that due to unreasonable jealousy and a dislike of playing seconds, begrudging Donna her momentary importance, Stanley played off sick rather than attend the reading. She rather despised herself, all told. Annoying memories of having cheated her father in similar ways suggested themselves—yet no one ever seemed to have cheated her, she instantly added.

"Come, come, Stanley, not so conceited, my child," she told herself. She often indulged in imaginary dialogues, one part of her playing rebuking mentor, a maternal image dimly erected out of her subconscious mind, the other half an irrepressible Stanley who dared to express in flattering, ruthless terms the extremely high opinion she held of herself and her powers.

"I shall see him again—and he will remember me as a fatherless little girl," she ended as she resigned herself to the hated lessons and the daily botany excursions.

CHAPTER III

WHEN Donna graduated and Stanley was left with no other intimate friend, Stanley and Tante parted. Miss Masters finally screwed up her courage to replace this middle-aged woman with a pupil-teacher who received one-half Tante's pittance and had one-tenth of her ability. Tante went abroad to live in lonely peace. There could be little purpose remaining about the fringe of Stanley's horizon—perhaps Stanley had not wholly deceived her the night that she had fallen down the stairs! That she must stand by and be ready to do her duty, as she had promised Millard Ames, was taken for granted, but perhaps this duty could be better performed by living abroad on half what it would require in America and paying for Stanley's music and dancing, letting her have her head since it was evident that her heart was in no danger of asserting itself.

She had offered to take Stanley with her. But Stanley, her green eyes all swords instead of stars, murmured that she could not consider becoming an added burden on Tante's purse. This precluded Tante's stating that she already was a burden—one which sent Tante to Continental *pensions* and chilly London boarding-homes where coals were extra and afternoon tea without a biscuit.

Stanley had judged this to be so—just as she judged

that a nature less simple and sincere would have told her so.

"I shall stay at school and try to be a credit," she promised docilely enough. "At first I hated it; I had had such freedom with father. Now Donna has gone—and you are leaving. But I'm counting off each day like a prison sentence," and she thought of the last tedious summer vacation spent on a farm with nothing but nature books and farmer's gossip, coarse food and beastly early hours at both ends of the day, Tante reading essays and trying to write poetry, taking unheard-of tramps in square-toed boots, arguing with the local divine as to fundamentalism. Tante had called it refreshing: Stanley considered it purgatory.

"What will you do when you are through school?" Tante had asked fearfully. She knew well enough that it would be neither teaching nor nursing nor secretarial work. In the early 'nineties the sphere for women was sharply defined.

Stanley threw her arms about Tante's neck, noting its aging creases, the sharpish, cleanly smell of carbolic soap and dried lavender. She wondered if this advanced Tante had ever had a lover and if so—who, pray tell? She pitied her for all that she had been denied.

"I'll do something of which you and father would approve," she said vaguely as if Tante were pressing a sensitive question to an unbearable point.

Convinced that Stanley had already made up her mind, Tante was forced to leave her at Miss Masters's with arrangements as to her pin money and advice as to her study courses, to write weekly letters as to what she had done, and what Stanley was doing. Stanley's

answers were couched in effusive terms with many underlined phrases. The fox woman reported progress in literature, failure in mathematics, clumsiness in domestic science while her pride in amateur theatricals knew no bounds. She was overjoyed at Donna Lovell's being given a part in a Shakespearean production; she only wished that she could give Donna the most wonderful wedding present in the world. Donna had hinted that she might be married inside of another year if all continued to go well with Blair, who was starring in *The Masked Ball* and deluged with mash notes. Stanley was to visit her after graduation—unless dear Tante said otherwise. But where else (in the following paragraph) was she to go? She had no wish to drag Tante back for a stupid commencement, particularly to a school unappreciative of Tante's brain, etc., etc. (It was easier to flatter Tante when not confronted by her penetrating eyes.) In fact, Stanley had already promised to spend the summer at Mary Dealey's theatrical boarding-house—there, her secret was out—what had Tante to say?

The next letter confessed the rest of her plan. She was to try her fortunes on the stage—was Tante too shocked for words? But, no, Tante was liberal, one could always rely upon her superior judgment! The Brooklyn stock company in which Donna had played might offer Stanley a chance. She would do any wee part—a parlor maid with a feather duster to flit here and there as the curtain rose. She was keeping her plans a secret. Here Stanley dropped affectionate flattery and wrote a few pertinent words to the effect that she was tired of being poor and dependent: she

would be eighteen and free—no one could dictate to her any longer.

Reading the letter in her room at the Lausanne *pension* Tante gave a dry chuckle. Just as she had expected . . . poor dead Helen and poor dead Ames . . . how strange for two such natures to have brought forth a fox woman! Gradually Stanley made inroads upon everyone—even to Donna's profession! Rereading the letter, Tante admired its composition. Stanley knew how to plead her own case. She answered, wishing her success and saying that she was remaining over indefinitely. She had found translating to do—and she enclosed a hundred dollars as a graduation gift.

Stanley's genuinely grateful thought as she discovered the check was not prejudiced as she read the curt I-shan't-try-to-interfere paragraphs. Poor old Tante, rotten luck to have had a flat, shiny nose and huge feet—for half a day Stanley indulged in pensive memories of the Hotel Lenox and her father. When it was time to dress for dinner tears had reddened her eyes and it was necessary to use liquid powder to conceal her mottled cheeks. There was something weakly sentimental about Stanley in spite of her ruthless tendencies. She got up quite a case over her forlorn childhood and Tante's thwarted love . . . it was all so unjust and pathetic, she told herself. No one coming to see her graduate, going alone to a theatrical rooming-house to try her fortunes on the stage—she, whose father was an Ames and whose mother a Stanley. Only Donna to stand by—and Blair she included, no matter how altruistic were her intentions as to presenting Donna with the most wonderful wedding present in the world.

There was a thrill of uncertainty about Blair, not so much as an individual but as a new adventure. Stanley felt that she had been a prisoner for three tedious years—life owed her some compensation. She had so magnified her lacks that she considered herself a heroine even before she took the small room next to Donna's sky parlor, one of her trunks shoved under her cot and the other converted into a semicouch with an Indian blanket thrown over it in Mary Dealey's "stylish" way. There was a matter of three hundred dollars a year upon which Stanley could depend; enough to "keep the wolf out of the kitchen sink," Donna comforted. She had remnants of finery dating back to the days when she selected her clothes without thought of the bills. Tante had written that she must never hesitate to ask for aid; if the stage venture did not succeed, she, Tante, would return to America or send for Stanley—they would put their heads together and plan on something else.

Stanley did not intend to fail. She had a suspicion that most of her three hundred a year was supplied by Tante; it is always more comfortable to stay away from the person to whom one is indebted.

During the summer Mary Dealey's house harbored a motley crew; she descended to taking acrobats and magicians, whereas the regular season saw a clientèle of popular stars, substantial character men and women who had called Mary Dealey's "home" for the last twenty-five years.

Mary Dealey was an egg-shaped little woman with a round, good-natured face, a florid complexion, sharp eyes and a mouth that smiled onesidedly when she was pleased and drew into a forbidding pucker when other-

wise. Her father, Tim Dealey, the minstrel, had toured Australia where he met and married a rancher's daughter. She returned to the States as a result of Tim's promise to retire into private life. A theatrical boarding-house proved the compromise. In the four-story brownstone front, Tim and Mary had made welcome, trusted, dunned, denounced and protected more members of the theatrical world than they could remember. Upon their child's plump shoulders had fallen this hospitable mantle. Mary Dealey's had come to be a byword with the profession. Content with single bliss and a satisfactory bank account, the dimensions of which were a constant subject of debate among the boarders, Mary maintained that combination of a private house and a professional world. Upon opening the carved walnut door one felt one was at home; there was the suggestion of easy slippers, grate fires, home-made pie. Yet the smell of grease paint and the thrill of first nights somehow conveyed themselves even to casual callers.

With the former background of careless, undisciplined hotel life this boarding-house seemed something of a promised land and into Mary Dealey's arms Stanley went with every effusion she knew how to utter.

Holding her off at arm's length, Mary studied her face. "It's being Donna's friend that wins your welcome," she said slowly. "Donna's friend would be welcome if I had to share me own bed. I've no time to talk, for the McFaddens have wired their engagement is cancelled. The theater burned in Detroit—and hungry and disheartened they'll be when they get home." She disappeared towards the future McFadden

suite leaving Donna to establish Stanley in her new surroundings.

"Where is your Blair?" asked Stanley as soon as they were alone.

"Dear old thing, doing an extra week at a Coney Island music hall—don't breathe it to a soul. It's not what he likes but good money, and he must begin to save. It is hard for Blair to do that. He should have been born with the silver spoon," Donna was flying about unpacking Stanley's bags. "You lovely little midge—I wish I could have been at the train but I had to be at rehearsal. I'm so set up about everything. Mr. and Mrs. Florence say I'll do—they're the stars, you see. I don't believe I could stand any more happiness. I have a real part, Blair loves me and you are here," she stood in the center of the room, regal looking in spite of her rumpled frock, a velvety sort of beauty that seemed to belong in the frame of an old master rather than in the sky parlor of Mary Dealey's.

"You adore Blair, don't you?" mused Stanley, taking down her hair and letting it come shining and rippling over her black voile-clad shoulders. "I'm so tired," she added, "it's such a let-down after that lonely commencement. I hate being pitied, so don't try. I've been pitied for the last time."

"Of course you have, you dear infant—you're safe now. Just around the corner is the foot of the rainbow with a pot of gold marked 'Stanley'—I truly believe it. On Monday you're to go with Blair to see the stage manager of the stock company. We think he'll take you on. You'd be wonderful for *ingénue* parts if only your voice carries. What was it you asked about Blair?" she added with a self-conscious blush.

"Aren't you afraid to adore any man?" Stanley's eyes were somber, far-seeing.

"Not Blair. I'd die for him if needs be," Donna's voice rang out like a chime.

Stanley shook her head; Donna employed poor technique with her personal affairs. Not even for a bronzed-skinned, bright-haired young hero like Blair would she admit adoration—as for lying down and dying—she gave a shrill little laugh.

"Don't love anyone until it hurts," she advised. "That has been my tragedy. I've lost everything I've loved." She gazed out the window at the housetops with the uneven army of chimney-tops poking up at strange places, wondering if Donna really meant what she said.

"You'll not lose me, darling," Donna added. "You may have Blair, too—and there is your own pretty person and Mary Dealey—oh, Mary's a staunch friend."

"But you don't believe in what I can do," accused Stanley. "You count me a baby thing, an *ingénue*, someone to be petted and fed sugar-plums. You are the genius, the grand *artiste*," kissing her hands and bowing mockingly. "I don't know that I blame you—but perhaps I may be something of a surprise. Oh, I won't compete with your kind of art—the parts where one takes poison and rolls down the church steps with musical groans or comes after one's betrayer with a dagger. I may wear pink tulle and do ballet numbers but I'll find my own place. I've been without a place for three hateful years," her underlip curling in resentment.

There was a confidential hour during which Blair was analyzed pro and con, photographs shown and

admired, even paragraphs of letters. By the time the supper bell rang and Mary Dealey showed Stanley her place between the Swiss yodeler, Carl Gerber, and the ventriloquist, Professor Pender, Stanley knew to the last letter what sort of a man Donna was willing to die for. He was as charming as he was faulty and unevenly developed. What he needed was to love someone for whom he was willing to die, someone whom he worshiped in Donna's whole-hearted fashion. Donna would forego her career if Blair so desired. She wanted to please Blair first, God second, the public third—and herself if there was anything left to be pleased about.

This Blair could be unreasonably stubborn unless his emotions were concerned whereupon he could be unreasonably tractable. There were no lengths to which he might not go in either case. He would respond to "please" but never to "must"—his conceit was second only to his ability.

"A penny for your thoughts," Donna interrupted after supper. She sat down and took Stanley in her arms as she had so often held her at school.

"I've only wishes—most of them for you and Blair." Stanley's face was animated. "I wonder if you will let me share a bit of each of you; I can't give you all up to Blair. I'm not the sort that gives people up—"

"Silly sweet—as if Blair was not wanting to play big brother. Let me see what dresses you have. You might be taken on for next week. Leah Chesney is downstairs with a bad knee; she's a wonder at remodeling. Poor Leah's had hard luck with rheumatism and husbands—but she never fails with costumes."

CHAPTER IV

ON Sunday, when Blair had finished the uncongenial, lucrative week at the Golden Music Hall, eager for Donna's adoration and Mary Dealey's cooking, he came into the house with something of weariness in his usually buoyant step. It was June twilight. The ornate parlor—like a dowager dressed for her favorite grandchild's wedding—was flooded with a rosy light which transformed the furnishings. Instead of the plush upholstered pieces, gilt framed family chromos, bric-à-brac presented by appreciative roomers during prosperous moments, the moth-eaten fur rugs, the asthmatic cuckoo clock—an indistinct mist seemed to change the distressing appointments into pleasing, indefinite affairs. Looking out one of the front windows was a miniature edition of the Empress Eugénie herself. A black taffeta with a border of tiny mirrors to finish the drooping shoulder line, a sparkling tiara and bracelets of brilliants, black-laced sandals, caused Blair to put his hand to his heart while executing an exaggerated bow. Looking up to see if there was a joke after all, he found himself staring into Stanley's bright green eyes—all stars just now. The tiara emphasized how golden was her hair; she had rouged a trifle and used eyelash pomade; the tiara and bracelets were a loan from Leah, and as she swept a return curtsey she thought that she could not

have timed the meeting better. Donna was drying her hair—one of the Sunday tasks any young actress knows only too well. The “family” were week-ending or napping or strolling in the park. But Stanley had taken up her station in the parlor against Blair’s return; she had promised Donna to be there to welcome him.

In another moment Donna’s footsteps came racing down the stairs. In a wash dress, her black hair flying about her towed shoulders, she burst into the room and threw her arms about Blair’s neck.

“So you found her—isn’t she a dear—would you have remembered her as the same little Stanley you picked up at the foot of the seminary stairs? Would you believe that she could do a skirt dance almost as well as Lois Fuller? Don’t you hope that Brooks takes her on?”

“He needn’t commit himself. Please, Mr. Britton, you don’t *have* to remember me,” moving towards him, the swish of the taffeta skirt brushing Donna’s muslin gown in disdain.

Blair continued to stare down at her. Many things were happening to his temperamental heart. Glancing up, he smiled at Donna—a smile of dismissal although no one knew it then, not even Blair. It was the smile one gives to an old friend when one has found a new love and wishes the former to rejoice with him. In that moment of studying the would-be stock company actress, Blair reorganized his scheme of things. He was no longer a matinée idol first and the selfish but sincere lover of Donna last. He had been taken captive by this tiny individual who seemed a child and a siren, a figurine and a strange force, all in one. He was

annoyed and enraptured, ill at ease. His sang-froid deserted him under her sweet, steady gaze. He did not know how to begin to tell her what she had done. He wondered if she suspected that she had cast a spell over him, jealousy surging through him at the same instant; had she ever cast a similar spell? Then he consoled himself that this was no spell: it was kismet! This untried girl, so frail and alone, with wistful, bright eyes—to talk of her casting spells was slander. Poor Donna! Yet what wonders a heartbreak would do for her work, he found himself estimating cold-bloodedly. Blair's colorful self glimpsed the situation not as the conventional novelist's triangle but as an interesting drama with pathos and humor and even a happy ending! He was wondering about his future as he talked on about the stock company, answering Donna in careless monosyllables.

The next morning Blair took Stanley to stand inspection before the stock company manager who called her passable and wrote her down for a ballroom guest in the next play.

"I did remember you," Blair told her somewhat shyly, after she had thanked him and they were coming back to New York to luncheon and the eager Donna.

"I must have looked absurd." Stanley was divided in her interest. The zest in the forthcoming stage appearance equaled the being with this handsome actor whose eyes told her what his lips did not yet dare.

"I don't mean when I picked you up at Miss Masters's," he corrected. "I mean from some other life-time, some other planet, if you like—you're not orthodox, I take it? I don't know how much I believe in

that sort of thing or how safe it is for one to believe in it. The average person goes queer and takes to grass-eating cults if his mind strays from the beaten path. Still, there's something in it. Something that makes you wonder at the familiarity with which you grasp apparently new situations, the antagonism in meeting a stranger who to all intents is one's friend, and that superb joy that comes over a man when he enters a dingy parlor and finds it illumined because—because someone strange yet familiar is standing there, looking at him with wise, beautiful eyes . . . eighteen, are you, Stanley? You are the Sphinx's twin and Helen of Troy's débutante descendant!"

Back of Blair's stage environment was the puritanical training of a pioneer home. Instinctively he set Stanley apart from the rest of the world; she must be shielded, protected. He had no right to startle her with strange ideas—she might run from him if she suspected that he had dared to love her, to hope, even to plan.

Stanley was versed in the art of intelligent silence. She permitted him to flounder about conversationally. She paid Donna occasional compliments—with a tiny disparagement that did its deadly work after the compliments were forgotten. It was like the practical joke, the point of which is remembered after the humor has been exhausted. She knew that Blair was fascinated and that others might see this as well. She must curb his attentions. If she became a successful actress (eighteen knows nothing but rapid transits) she might do well not to have encouraged him too far. After all, he was only an actor, clever and handsome, but without fortune. After she had tried out her talents would be

time enough to decide whether she should let him go.

"I can hardly imagine Donna being a mere wife," she murmured as the horsecars stopped for them at the bridge gate and they climbed aboard. "To me, Donna is like a great wind—untamed and powerful—very invigorating if she remains outside one's house. Before all else Donna is meant to be an artist. Tremendously athletic, isn't she? A little taller and stronger even than *you*," nestling closer and looking up with helpless appeal. "Oh, but she said she was," with naïve betrayal. "She said that she could outwalk or outcycle you; I couldn't. You seem as strong as you are wise. Did I show how frightened I was this morning?" as Blair's eyes told more of his new secret. "I would have been hopeless if you hadn't been with me." The quiver of her underlip proved that she was struggling to control herself. "I cry when things bother—Donna whistles or swears—Donna's like a boy."

"I don't mind tears if I can choose which ones I'm to wipe away," Blair assured her. "You're a precious child—I want you to come and tell me things."

"But will you have the time and patience to listen?" she parried, tilting her head coquettishly. "You are so many miles ahead of me—I'm only a walking-on person—I have no one and nothing." Her eyes stared at the muddy river as the car snailed towards the city.

"You have me——"

"And Donna," in a whisper.

"And yourself—which is the most worth while of all! Many other people are going to tell you the same thing. You are——" he checked himself and took her back to Mary Dealey's liver-and-bacon luncheon with Donna, who, disheveled from a morning of sewing on

stage court robes under the direction of Leah Chesney, rejoiced at the news of Stanley's "engagement," as she insisted upon dignifying it; an "engagement" since it brought eight dollars a week and the hope of having "lines" at some future date.

CHAPTER V

BEFORE Stanley's first engagement ended Blair was summoned by a middle-aged comedienne of international fame. Being rather "gone" on him, she had sent for him, with others of her company, to come to her summer home at Cape Cod where they were to rehearse for an autumn tour, a dreary prospect save in the matter of salary.

"I can't chuck it," Blair complained to Donna. "It means a respectable bank account and good notices—but months away from you," he forced himself to add. "I leave Stanley in your hands," neither of them realizing that he had assumed a proprietorship. "She reminds me of fine lace among machine-made tatting. . . . I wish she never had to see a stage-door nor put a stick of rouge to her lips. She's not of us, is she?" he finished.

Under Stanley's spell and secure in her happiness with Blair, Donna agreed, arguing that being fine lace and quite the real thing, nothing could harm her. As an actress her career would probably be a short-lived affair. The right person would happen along to marry her and take her away. Donna saw everything through rosy glasses, Stanley's future included. She was so sure of herself and of Blair that she was a trifle nonplussed when Blair answered in indefinite fashion. Donna must not do anything which would interfere with her career,

a future of serious dramatic work, he urged. She must make the name of Lovell as famous in the second generation as it had been in the first. It was up to Donna to forget personal affairs and be the artist.

"But I love you," she protested. "And you need me, Blair, more than the public will ever want me. I can't enthuse over being a Lovell as I can about becoming Donna Britton."

"That's fine of you, old girl," patting her shoulder absent-mindedly. "Very fine—perhaps I'm not worth it."

"Sssh—we've laid all the ghosts. I know that you've been a wild young thing. You may even break bounds ever so often. Oh, Blair, you only turned actor because it was the easiest thing to do. You're capable of so much else; you could go far in the world—Stanley said so," and wondered as she spoke why Stanley was mentioned as a last authority.

Stanley had avoided saying more than a public good-bye to Blair. No one suspected her subterfuges. Intuition caused her to evade; Blair must go away wishing that he had been able to see her alone, that he might have foregone something of Donna's prolonged good-bye and the good wishes of Mary Dealey's establishment.

Stanley, too, was feeling under a spell. At first she had wanted Blair because he was a tangible thing to fox for—because she did not want Donna to have him. Now, the strangeness of New York and the dinginess of the back bedroom, Mary Dealey's practical self, so shrewd an appraiser of humans that Stanley's effusive protests sometimes fell on rather deaf ears, were beginning to pall. The curiosity of her associates, and the

indifference of the stage manager, whose affections were pledged in other directions, resulted in Stanley's resurrection of snobbery! She had rather forgotten how to be a snob during the last few years, being too busy pitying herself and planning for her future. But this new environment was something which aroused a sense of superiority. Even Donna took readily to faded dressing-sacks and untidy breakfast tables. Stanley summoned mental images of the days with her father, days of leisure and luxury spent in mellowed, Old-World cities. There was Dalefield's provincial but aristocratic setting into which she had been born. Tante's stupid yet impressive position as Judge Aydelotte's daughter. Only the damnable lack of money prevented Stanley's being received anywhere. She wavered in her desire to be a heroine rather than an heiress—although why not both, she sometimes asked herself while waiting for the cars on cold, rainy days or on finding that Professor Pender was training monkeys in his rooms which adjoined hers, and little Lolo Luther, the child wonder, and her father and mother, banjo and cornet soloists, chose Mary Dealey's front hall to stage their family differences which began with words and ended with blows, little Lolo acting as referee!

Blair's family were well enough in their way—his father had been a minister and his mother a country doctor's daughter. They had been comfortable, middle-class people who had pushed on towards the western coast to find hardships rather than a fortune. Blair had escaped, as he termed it, before he became either hardworking or respectable. Had he only been born a rich man's son, Stanley regretted. It would have been

ideal if this could have been so and they had met in Florence, her father at her side. What a courtship among the hills and roses and sunsets!

Still, Stanley remained Stanley, the most precious thing to which she could lay claim as Blair had told her; Blair was merely Blair. There was no cause to become faint-hearted, even if she found herself wishing that he had not gone away for almost half a year, and Donna wore a modest little ring and mooned about her love between bites of lunch and rehearsing her lines.

Deprived of saying a personal good-bye meant that they could write to each other. She could answer tantalizing nothings yet deny their meaning when confronted by her reader. She could question and hint and command in her pretty rolling hand and on violet-shaded notepaper. She could add postscripts suggesting that there was someone at the theatre who seemed to like her rather well but she was fearful of him, she wished that she could see Blair to tell him about it. It was so easy to tell him things; he never misinterpreted.

The responses to these notes were voluminous letters in Blair's queer print-like hand. Gradually, the letters grew as bold as his print. They became daily affairs directed to the theater since not only Donna but the rest of Mary Dealey's family would have spied them out in contrast with Donna's semiweekly letter.

At Christmas—and surreptitiously—Stanley wore a sapphire centered locket containing a bit of Blair's bright hair. It was then that she wondered how to tell Donna the truth. Blair had hinted concerning the same problem. From the confines of a Middle West second-rate hotel which catered to "troupers," he had taken

time between the matinée and the evening performance to write Stanley the truth. He loved her. In one sense he scarcely knew her—in another she already seemed to belong to him. She had sympathized with his belief in this thing called fate, of two souls meeting and loving without Madame Grundy's preliminaries.

. . . True, there was Donna, dear, worthwhile girl that she was—he still loved Donna. But he had come to understand what sort of emotion it was. It was the affection one has for a sister, a man-chum. If there had been no Stanley it would have proven a mistake for them to have married. (Already Stanley had paved the way to being excused for having been a destructive force in Donna's life.) She must understand that no matter what her answer would be he would continue to love her and to hope—it had come to be a part of him. He had been born loving Stanley—foolishly frittering away time until she had appeared. He wanted to take her away from the stage as much as he wanted to make himself worthy to be her husband; he would turn to something with a sound future in order to give Stanley the setting she desired. Did this sound too self-assured? Too superlative? Well—he was waiting her verdict.

For hours Stanley debated what was best to do. It was a question of diplomacy, she decided; gradually Donna must see the situation. Donna had begun her trousseau—a modest hand-made affair far removed from the gaudy stage robes. Her *début* in the new play had been made with a surprising carelessness. Critics hinted that "a daughter of the Lovells" was capable of better work. Donna ignored the challenge.

"First of all comes Blair," she explained to Mary

Dealey. "I could not help being born a Lovell but I can help remaining one. The stage was life to them—to me it is work. Blair is my life——"

"But Blair is only a man," warned Mary Dealey. "You must not spoil him any more than spoil your own chances. Oh, better romances than yours have gone up Salt River—it might be well to have work to fall back upon."

Donna declined to argue. In indignation she had gone to Stanley. Because Mary had seen fit to have spinsterhood thrust upon her was she to play pessimist for every other woman? Blair was different—why, he was Blair! Stanley realized this, did she not?

Stanley did. As she assured Donna that Mary was too absurd to be taken seriously, she asked herself whether it might not be best to let matters drift, to keep Blair in the position of Mahomet's coffin, figuratively suspended in midair until she had decided how far she could proceed with an independent career. This would not be difficult. Blair would not return for several weeks. A musical extravaganza was opening in New York. Stanley had a chance at a rôle, a pigmy affair, true enough, but these were pioneer days of unimportance, of enlisting everyone's sympathies because of her modesty and good nature. The part was that of a trig maid to a naughty Viennese opera singer. She was to wear a black satin uniform with a ruffled cap and utter one line in the opening scene before a chorus of Hussar officers rushed upstage to the stirring music of a "zum-zum" drinking song. The one line was: "Poor me, I must be good and get ten dollars a week and wash milady's dog!"

As Stanley had accepted the part, agreeing to find

her costume as long as the management furnished an abject scrap of a thing billed as an Algerian poodle, she had a recurrence of feeling far superior to her present circumstances. Unless success came to her, the sort of success which meant a Riverside Drive apartment, her own brougham and pair of bays, she wanted to return to the provincial dignity of Dalefield where she would be honored as an Ames and where everyone would remember that her mother had been a Stanley.

She answered Blair's letter in a half I-might and I-might-not fashion, appealing to him as her "big brother person" to whom everything could be confided and whose single word of advice was regarded as infallible. Love? That was a new word for her—she must take time—he would not mind? Not he who believed in kismet and karma and other mysterious, brainy things. She knew that he would be patient—besides, they must not hurt Donna. The letter was as skilful as the ruffles she had made for her stage maid's cap.

With evident self-restraint Blair responded, his ardor occasionally overriding the acquiescent sentences. Of course he would wait—meantime she must allow him to write to her! Under these circumstances it would be best for him to go on to the coast and remain away until she had decided. When he came back—what then? Surely she would write some word of promise?

"I'm going to Chicago to tell Blair good-bye," Donna announced one Sunday morning at breakfast.

Mary Dealey and her family looked up to applaud. "Don't marry him before he goes," they warned. "That's what he'll be after."

"Don't go on to the coast with him—you've your

own job. It'll be filled when you come back and hard enough to find it again."

"I ought to be chaperoned," Donna added mischievously. "I've a mind to take Stanley if I could afford it. It's to be a complete surprise. I've planned it to have almost three days with him—we are moving our show to the Adelphi, thanks be, and it breaks into the week beautifully. Stanley, what do you say?"

Stanley was sipping her coffee and looking the picture of demureness in a flowered cashmere breakfast robe. "I can't go, dear," she said reluctantly. "We're doing a rushing business—my poor little line would be swallowed up by half a dozen rivals. Besides, Blair will have you more to himself, and Mrs. Kirk will play mamma." Mrs. Kirk, the dowager member of Blair's company, had played with Donna's parents in their early days.

After Donna had packed and drawn on her savings for her ticket, Stanley retired into her sky parlor and mentally reviewed what had happened up to this momentous nineteenth year. The upshot of the review was that she was in New York with few resources and an ignominious servant's part in an extravaganza. Dalefield ties seemed to have faded away, Tante was abroad, and the only offer of marriage was from her best friend's lover, an impulsive young actor.

"You must do better than this by the next nineteen years," she told herself. "You have nothing to really call your own." She paced up and down until the Turner Brothers, who lodged directly underneath, thought she must be practising the grande finale of the extravaganza and commended her for her diligence.

"I shan't appear broken up about Blair's going to the coast," Donna told Stanley. "I'll pretend to be glad, content. But I've begun to count off the days until he comes back. There is something rather terrible in loving someone so much—you baby, why should you listen to such things? It is not so very terrible, after all . . . sometimes you act as if you were afraid of me," she accused, trying to draw Stanley into her arms.

"Afraid of you? Why, Donna, you're all nerves these days. You're making a mistake to care so intensely. No one is worth it," looking earnestly into Donna's dark eyes, "not even Blair—certainly not silly little me. You are either too serious or else all tomboy. If things went wrong for you, you'd suffer, Donna. I'd only be hurt—there is a great difference. Don't suffer except when you're doing a bully part and your salary recompenses you for each look of agony. Let them do the weeping out in front—save your tears——"

"You sophisticated infant—whatever are you trying to prepare me for?"

"Anything—nothing! Blair is a complex person, so am I. You are simple and direct. Therefore, you're likeliest to suffer." Stanley refused to elaborate any further. Donna must understand that since she seemed destined for tragedy, it was better to experience it before the footlights than under the merciless stare of reality! The choice would lie in her own hands.

As she talked there ran through Stanley's mind the jealous thought that Donna was going to Blair because it was her right to do so—this would never do. Stanley must be first, must be given all rights even if she chose to discard them later.

As Stanley was lisping about "being good and getting ten dollars a week and washing the dog" with the chorus of Hussars about to descend upon her, Donna and Blair played a tense act in their own drama, a scene in which the absent Stanley was the dominant character.

It had been useless for Blair to pretend when confronted by Donna's eyes. He found himself numb, unable to respond to her futile enthusiasms. She was his dear comrade, he kept telling her; he was not worthy of someone else whom he loved in spite of pledges and obligations, whose very name brought a stammer into his speech and an eager look into his eyes. Would Donna not understand—could she not believe in kismet, too?

Something in Donna died as he told her, that first fine energy of youth. She felt as if life had passed her by, yet she had no desire to tag after in the hope of catching up. Yes, she would try to understand; she was not angry, but bruised to the very soul. Of course Blair must do as he felt was right, no matter what the cost. And she would remain his comrade—but oh, how could he? she broke out in spite of herself—how could he? She had been so proud, so sure, so happy.

"That is what tortures me," said Blair humbly. "I can't bear to see you like this, or to have you misjudge her! Hate and loathe me if you like—although I'll fight for your friendship to the end—but don't be harsh towards her. She is so sensitive, so fearful of hurting you, she cares for you as I do. Won't you believe us? I shall take her away from all of this," with a sweep of his hand about the dressing-room. "I shall start doing something else, something that will

make her feel secure and protected . . . an actor's life is nothing to offer to a girl like Stanley," unconscious of the abrupt announcement.

"Stanley," cried Donna. "Stanley!" She walked towards the door. When she turned back and looked at him her face was as old and crumpled looking as if she had slipped on a mask.

"You poor girl. Oh, Donna, please try to understand."

"Why try?" said Donna helplessly, tears forcing their way down her tired face. "Why try ever to understand?"

Dramatically, Blair buried his head in his arms, "Stanley darling," he was telling himself, "you don't know the cost of loving you—but I'd pay it—no matter what!"

That next night Stanley was called upon to do a solo dance owing to the broken ankle of one of the cast. She pirouetted before an unsuspecting audience, her tulle frock seemingly sprinkled with silvery frost. Once the twang of the string instruments and the lilt of the flute reached her ears, she forgot self-consciousness and snobbery and Blair—she was nothing if not the première danseuse of the evening. Someone threw her a bunch of violets and someone else called "bravo"; there was a great pelting of applause. She told herself that she was through having to play maids with one-line jokes—the brougham and the pair of bays might not be a mere dream, after all!

CHAPTER VI

IN 1894 the furore over *Trilby* hearts, the phenomenon called hypnotism, the rising popularity of Rudyard Kipling, the impropriety of the skirt dance, were not the only things which demanded recognition in New York circles. Two young actresses enjoyed increasing attentions. The elder, Donna Lovell, was a tragedienne of Modjeska possibilities whose heart-break betrayed itself in her dark eyes. Because Miss Lovell was the dark-skinned Murillo type lacking in personal vanity or self-exploitation, she had gathered a following of discriminating admirers who prophesied that she was to go far in her art.

The other, Miss Stanley Ames, was the petite type who photographed so well curled up in a Moyen-âge chair, a huge feather fan pressed gracefully against one dimpled cheek. She suggested anonymous boxes of flowers with a jeweler's box snuggled among the fullest of the blooms. Enemies of Miss Ames hinted that in later years she might become the plump, small-waisted type one saw in the cashier's cage of a foreign restaurant, while Miss Lovell's detractors murmured something about her figure being not unlike that of a billiard cue; but critics and managers combined to supply praise and contracts notwithstanding.

Mary Dealey's best suite was Miss Lovell's home,

she explained, when fair-fortune friends suggested leasing something more suitable than the old-fashioned rooms.

In addition to Stanley Ames's having regulated the vogue regarding evening slippers and hair ornaments—the Stanley bow and the Ames dancing-pump—Stanley's apartment was presided over by a prim, white-capped maid who answered to the name of Pilgrim Crumb.

Pilgrim was one of Stanley's most sincere followers. She was a suspiciously perfect-toothed British individual with an oatmeal complexion and a Bow Bells accent. She could speak with awe-inspiring familiarity of the Countess of Leesmead with whom she had been in her early years, of Lord and Lady Pontifex and the seven years spent in Calcutta as the latter's personal attendant. Her present mistress reaped the benefit of these exclusive experiences.

Secretly, Stanley was bored with Pilgrim's preachments and judgments. There were moments when she would have liked to fling a slipper after this female grenadier. But as Tante lingered abroad, indefinite as to her plans, Pilgrim was an essential accessory.

Stanley's situation was peculiar. She had been made popular overnight and had become engaged, whether or no, to Blair Britton who immediately deserted the stage for journalism. Not for an instant did Stanley believe that the stage was the place where she belonged or intended to stay. She had an indefinable air of patronage towards her contemporaries. She made it clear that she was a danseuse because (first) her father's fortune had disappeared upon his death and (second) because dancing was the oldest of the arts,

the most ethical if one analyzed. Lastly, because she had not yet chosen to marry.

All the good fairies in the world seemed to have been present at her birth, her rivals conceded. This well-bred girl from nowhere (Dalefield translated into Broadway vernacular) with little training had come into prominence overnight and caused the hour's matinée idol to break Donna Lovell's heart.

"Stanley doesn't want to marry Blair," one of the managers had said after seeing them together a few times. "She wants to be engaged; it becomes her type better than a scandal. Blair's wasting a brilliant career."

On a dull February afternoon, long drops of half snow, half rain challenging anyone to leave their four walls unless forced to do so, Blair was beginning to wonder whether this might not be so.

He was up fairly early for a morning newspaper man—one o'clock—and had made as careful a toilette as if he were the hero in a new comedy. He presented himself at Stanley's apartment in the hope of an uninterrupted afternoon. Stanley was in her element these days; February thaws and leaden skies had neither depressing nor restraining effects. For the moment, life was to her liking. She was starring in a *Cinderella* pantomime—a children's production with an adult appeal. She charmed all those who sat through the two hours and a quarter of nonsensical songs, red-nosed comedians and grotesque fairy godmothers. With slightly different backing Stanley would never have remained a mere actress; she would have recited clever things in French at morning musicales and given afternoon programmes of *fairy-tales-to-music* for the chil-

dren of the ennuied rich. By so doing, her social contacts would have been made. She could easily have become fond of the nieces and nephews of bachelor uncles. But she complimented herself on having carved out the steps in her own ladder of fame—the Brooklyn stock company, the maid in the extravaganza, the broken ankle of a première dancer, and her own ability. She must be content, she would conclude, when taking inventory of her apartment with Pilgrim's gaunt person stalking here and there to arrange newly arrived flowers or placing the scarlet satin pillows on the black velvet divan in a prim pyramid.

Stanley had no intimate friends, only endless acquaintances, enough rivals to make life interesting, and a secret ambition or so which prevented her going down into history as a baby-doll creature suggesting nothing more than white poodles and satin-tied boxes of French bonbons. Something subtle and unsatisfied in those green sparkling eyes hinted that Stanley possessed brains! One wondered what it was for which she was waiting—or was it something which she had lost?

Too many of Broadway's idols had followed the same deadly formula of success—Dottie Ferris who had played the pearl in the mammoth oyster shell, for example, a charming "living picture" in the first act of a pirate operetta in which Dottie was discovered dozing in her shell and possessing not a frill nor flounce that she could call her own. Within five years after her elopement with young Manwarring she was a magnificent creature with jewels which no one could match—but never an idea to call her own.

"Is it Donna that haunts you?" Blair had asked

Stanley more than once. This had been in the first flush of their romance, in the days when Blair, so much in love that he had lost his sense of values, had begun as reporter on a morning dreadful—with a reduced salary but an increased incentive. “Mustn’t worry about her, darling. Let me do your share of that. I always end by saying that she is Donna—and she will understand.”

“It is not Donna,” Stanley would answer, the green eyes narrowing to look at him astutely. “I hate to suggest this to you—but Donna does not understand! She is an artist and can suffer intelligently—but that does not mean that she can comprehend.” Looking at Blair through half-closed, shining eyes, she would remember Donna’s coming upon her in her sky parlor at Mary Dealey’s, all hurt, accusing eyes and shiny white cheeks as if she had been ill for a long time. She could hear Donna’s voice as she had said: “Although you don’t love him, Stanley, promise that you will pretend to do so. Never let him know that you don’t care. Don’t break his heart, too,” swaying in the doorway like some wounded jungle creature who refused to surrender no matter what the consequence.

Stanley was confused as to what her own answer had been. All that she remembered was Donna’s overpowering and pathetic self. At that moment she had begun to be afraid although she had succeeded in stealing Donna’s lover and happiness. She had faltered something about its being fate, that Blair was to blame, but under the storm of Donna’s scorn she emerged with the feeling that she should continue to pretend to love Blair—for a time. Perhaps she would come to love him for always—who could tell? She must take

care that Blair appear in the wrong should the time arise when she wished to be free from him. Blair's love threatened to be impossible and passionately sincere. His sacrifice of a career fretted her as did the seven-day gossip at Mary Dealey's. She was bored now that she had achieved her goal—just as when she had won from her father the second canary and the years abroad. Once a goal was reached, the zest of the game seemed to have ended.

"Donna is a great artist, therefore she can understand as well as interpret," Blair would insist. "But what does she matter—wretches that we are? Don't keep me on probation much longer, darling. I need you twenty-four out of twenty-four hours a day. Donna wants me to have you, she is great enough to wish that. Belong to me, let's begin our real life together. . . ."

Pretending to be swayed, shrewdly weighing Blair's salary against her own and her independence, Stanley would murmur some half-consenting, half-uncertain something which would send Blair away in a haze of hope, more than ever convinced as to kismet and to loving Stanley forever, no matter what might come.

After some two years of this—Blair rising in newspaper fame as he sank in Stanley's secret estimation, and Stanley the accepted children's stage idol—there had come a readjustment in relationships. Life was, perforce, a practical affair. If Blair could become sufficiently wonderful to have someone buy him a newspaper or nominate him for Congress, Stanley would rejoice in exchanging the greenroom for Blair's drawing-room. If not, well, did he not wish romance to

endure? As matters stood their affair was both thrilling and convenient. They were young; the best of life was before them. She was gaining in experience; Blair was gaining in—

“Drink and debts,” Blair had interrupted, looking at her as impersonally as it was possible to do. “A morning newspaper does not produce plaster saints. You are not of the theater—you are a success because you are Stanley. You would succeed either in Hindustan or Painted Post. Once, I thought you naïve; now, I consider you subtly ingenuous. Don’t misconstrue me, dearest—I’m only realizing things as they are. You were born young of heart but old of brain, an adorable intrigante to whom everyone yields because they cannot help but love. . . . Well, would you have me remain the duped adorer? Is it not better to know the bad as well as the good?”

“Do you count diplomacy as ‘bad’?” was Stanley’s protest.

“I’ll modify it by saying, to know the real Stanley —does that sound better?” he compromised as he kissed her. “Nothing will make me change, not a dozen ‘real’ Stanleys, clever and dissembling coquettes. I’m hopelessly yours—perhaps I’ll become a great burden, an old man of the sea.”

On this particular February afternoon, Blair had been striving to take himself in hand to the extent of figuring up debts and promising himself a limiting of future drinks and card games, a sober and definite talk with Stanley. As he waited in her crimson satin and black velvet drawing-room, replete with cut flowers and songbirds in wicker cages, photographs of half of Broadway superlatively autographed and artistically

framed, incense burning in thin streamers from a bronze urn above the canopied divan (it was the day of Oriental cozy corners), he told himself with a disconcerting start that Donna had been right, although he resented the discovery.

Donna had prophesied that he would surrender to Stanley without reservation. He had foregone his career and Donna's happiness, for what? In order that Stanley might proceed on her way with a mental stimulus resultant from knowing that no matter what she said or did someone loved and stood back of her. Exchanging the stage for the city room was a small maneuver in one sense. Blair was endowed with a sturdy mentality which would have bloomed in any soil in which it might take root. Yet the change had led to nothing since it in no way led to Stanley. True, he was known as her shadow, laughed at, perhaps, called here and there at her bidding, made to wait upon her moods, dismissed whenever she pleaded rehearsals or headache or social engagements.

He strolled restlessly about the room noting for the thousandth time its graceful appointments. It suggested Stanley from the moment one crossed the threshold, slipping on a huge leopard skin rug, until one sat at her Sheraton dining-room table conscious of the blaze of silver and cut glass and the sheen of the rose silk draperies. Donna's careless rooms with their shabby, miscellaneous collection of curios and necessities bespoke her own careless personality. Stanley merely played at being a home-maker—her apartment might have been used for a stage setting. Stanley and Donna were as a hothouse orchid compared with a spray of mountain heather.

Stanley came rustling in to him—like an eighteenth century belle in lilac crêpe with a pleated fichu.

"You're on one of your restless bear tramps," she complained as Blair kissed her cheeks and was refused her lips.

"Bad head—last night's poker game cost me my salary," was the testy excuse.

"Blair, Blair," shaking a reproving finger. "I was up dreadfully late but in my capacity of a hardworking person—like the scrubwomen who appear in office buildings at the stroke of twelve. Castleton insisted on a rehearsal after the show—wasn't that brutal? All for a new comedian who isn't going to last a week . . . perhaps you'll come by and see him?"

"Can't to-night. Harlem mass meeting . . . maybe a fight or two to make a streamer story."

"Then you won't be able to come take Pilgrim and me home?" laying her cheek against his and drawing him towards the Oriental corner.

"Afraid not; so often you won't let me. This is one of your unusually lovely days—what's up? Can't put me off; I've learned the symptoms. When you're shy, gracious and with a demure I'm-just-a-little-girl sort of air, something is in the offing to startle a fellow out of his self-assurance . . . 'fess up. I've a bad head; I need to be petted."

She stroked his forehead with soft little pats as if he were a baby she was coaxing into a prolonged nap. "Poor Blair, he will drink too much . . . perhaps he ought never have turned newspaperman—perhaps—"

"Perhaps nothing! I've done it. A newspaperman has a dog's life—with no one to send him to the

pound when he's outstayed his time. Perhaps I ought to have stayed in the old game or hired out as a rich banker's only son. I'd have done well in such a rôle—come about as a Johnny in a silk topper to hand you into your four-wheeler. I wonder how you'd have liked me then. I wonder why I did give it all up?"

"Because you loved me and you know that a good actor sometimes makes a poor husband," said Stanley quickly. "We wanted a real home and children; because you knew me to be a little silly with a talent for doing foolish trifles; because they are the vogue just now doesn't mean anything as to my future . . . Suppose Shakespeare and this Ibsen person should become the rage, where would I be? . . . Brrr, it frightens me," with a shiver which sent her close against Blair's shoulder.

"You don't save money any better than I, dearest," he said gently. "What's going to become of us?"

"I'm always about to save," she defended. "I mean to. Then it seems as if things simply walk into my way and cry 'Stanley, buy me—appreciate me—help me,' and I can't say No." She poked a small white kid slippered toe at her pet dog, Pugnacious. "Besides, I've Pilgrim to live up to. I'd be happy with simpler things but Pilgrim is positively overbearing in referring to her past. I must make Lady Pontifex's grade, that's all there is to it—and no one can do hair and make bows as well as Pilgrim. Besides I've only been a three-figured salary person for a short time—you must remember that——" trailing off into meaningful silence, one eye on the French china shepherdess who secreted a tiny clock on her folded arms.

"And I'm not able to help you," finished Blair bit-

terly. "I've not been in a position to marry you and take you away—not unless you'd be content with three rooms and Mari's table d'hôte for Sundays." He held her off at arm's length, looking directly into her eyes. "A newspaperman's salary is a joke, although his work is not. I'm not complaining, Stanley; I care too hard. But money does matter, doesn't it? Oh, dearest, let's don't have a tantrum—not this afternoon," with unexpected frankness which caused Stanley to restrain herself. "I've just said that nothing you could do or say would change me; perhaps I'm gauging you a little differently these days, sensing that you are drifting away from me, from those first wonderful plans——"

"You're not jealous of an imaginary someone?" Stanley interrupted, still with an eye on the clock.

"No, for the reason that you're superior to the average man you meet. Even if you no longer loved me I'd have no such fears——"

"Men admire me but they don't make love to me. They all know I'm engaged to Blair Britton," Stanley whispered as she came closer to him despite his efforts to keep her at arm's length. "They say, 'Oh, Blair's an elegant lad, he'll make his mark yet,' and look at my engagement ring and then ask if I'm signing for another season. It protects me—that little ring; I glory in it. I'm not the sort wanting married men to send me pearl necklaces and managers suggesting that I take the same ship to London as the one they've booked on——"

"Do you think it necessary to explain in such detail? I hate even to hear you talk of it. Won't you ever realize how much I believe in you, how much I want you for my own? I must hurry things along somehow.

It is only when I grow discouraged that I say perhaps they are hopeless." Blair began circling around the room.

"We've plenty of time," hinted Stanley softly.

"I doubt it; where will you be? Miles away from me. Oh, I've been in your game—I know it. No matter what you think, darling, you're not apt to stay the same. If you won't share poverty with me, nor let me share the life with you, we can't guard too carefully against drifting. Perhaps drifting is a career in itself—a lot of people seem to think so—but it's not one to appeal to a lover . . ."

"It is so early in the day to be serious," she bantered. "I shan't offer you a drink as a bribe, either. You sound as if you'd been reading morbid philosophy or else talking to—Donna. You do see her, don't you?" an imperative tone in her voice.

"I can't help running into her now and then at Mary Dealey's."

"Wouldn't it have been wiser to leave there?"

"Why? What does it matter where I room unless you come to me?"

"But to attempt being married on your salary——"

"Or to be married and let you live on your own," he added angrily. "Oh, I agree. But at least you'd be mine, you'd be Stanley Britton. Or I'd be Mr. Stanley Ames, if you like."

The clock chimed the half-hour and Stanley frowned, a warning signal.

"I shall never marry and remain an actress. I've always told interviewers that. When I leave the stage I go into my own home, *our* own home," looking at Blair with tender appeal.

"Don't you give me credit for realizing that? For wanting our dreams to come true? When I keep plugging along in the reporters' grind and you dancing before anyone who can buy a ticket to watch you, you selfish, extravagant darling—is it any wonder that I grow discouraged?"

"So you run to tell Donna, who listens because she loves you and mends your gloves and urges a tonic if you look tacky." The metallic tone of voice was unfamiliar even to Pugnacious, who roused from his doze to discover who had entered his mistress's domain. "She hints that I ought to make a choice, be your wife in three rooms or a tent, as she would, or else give you up; that it isn't kismet, it is just me! Oh, I haven't a doubt but what she says all this and more—women like Donna have the same poor taste in opinions as in hats."

"Please," he raised a protesting hand. "Donna is the most wonderful friend that a man ever had—she would be your friend even yet if you could but believe it. Life has handed her a hard sort of deal, yet she has gone ahead playing a straight game. Of course Donna will succeed—surely she has earned that much. After all, the law of compensation is not entirely defunct."

"You think that she has had any harder time than I?" The clipped, abbreviated manner of speaking was indicative that Stanley's temper was aroused. "She was an orphan—so was I. She had neither money nor position to be taken away. For her, boarding-school was a privilege; for me it was a prison. The stage was her natural bent. Mary Dealey's house spelled home to her—to me both were unfair ordeals. Yet I had no

other choice: my only friend was a tyrannical spinster who had been guilty of an—an intrigue with my dear father. Ah, you may as well know it all. I had that sorrow as a child, too." Stanley had just thought of this new complication. "All those years I sensed that something was wrong; it only suppressed the sorrow for my mother. . . . I'm not blaming Tante, poor, pent-up old maid! She must have felt an overwhelming guilt when she slunk off to Europe, for she has stayed there until—" Her eyes wandered back to the clock.

"Stanley, did you have that, too? You lovely forlornity—of course your life has been hard—"

"But not as hard as Donna's—nor did Donna adore you as I do." Once started in her own defense it became a fascinating game. "She loved you as a boy loves a boy—in a tomboy, shoulder-to-shoulder fashion. She'd have fostered your selfishness, slaved for you—been neglected by you! Ah, but she would. But because I recognized that we were meant for one another and have tried to be game and go it alone until you could take care of me—am I such an evasive drifter? What else would you have me do? Drudge and grow waspish while you stayed out the entire night and forgot our golden dreams? If you want me to be practical, I can tell you that it will take a wise and a patient woman to make a man of you, Blair. You could be so easily spoiled. . . . You must not tell Donna Lovell your reactions and expect her sympathies. Donna thinks of you as a great actor gone astray; I know you to be a great man who has not yet found himself. . . . You will thank me later, for having shoved you into the world of ink and politics. Donna

and of course there are no fixed boundaries, but

the following may be considered as the chief features of the system.

1. The first and most important feature is the

use of the word "I" in the first person singular.

2. The second feature is the use of words which

are not in the first person singular, but are used in

the first person singular, as if they were in the

first person singular, and as if they were in the

first person singular, and as if they were in the

first person singular, and as if they were in the

first person singular, and as if they were in the

first person singular, and as if they were in the

first person singular, and as if they were in the

first person singular, and as if they were in the

the material world named "personality." It had been transferred to Stanley, which he resented in a shamed manner as if it constituted disloyalty. In the three years which had elapsed since Stanley had arrived at Mary Dealey's, Blair had given to her the elements which had made for her success. He was amazed to find himself continuing along this line of thought—as startled at the discovery as one can be astonished at what has been happening to one's nearest neighbors—illness or weddings or burglars—while life has apparently been jogging along in the same raise-the-shades-at-seven-ten and take-in-the-milk-at-seven-fifteen fashion.

It was difficult to accuse Stanley of this theft of personality—what a weak, imaginative rummy he must be! Yet had she not absorbed something of his talent and technique? Had he not suggested almost every appealing trick that made managers clamor for her to star in their semi-juvenile productions? Stanley had a way with her; people told her things or gave her things or hoped and prayed for things to come to her. She seemed to make no effort to bring this to pass. It appeared a voluntary act of tribute on the part of whoever was within her personal horizon. Perhaps it was magnetism, perhaps it was charm, perhaps it was both or something else. Blair was beginning to feel old; the fine, free things of youth had passed him by. It was not that he longed for the stage rather than the fourth estate. He was keen, even proud about this new work. Already the first half of a novel was lying in his desk. He might as well be honest; it was what Stanley had done to him. Figuratively, he felt as if he had mortgaged himself for her, his abilities and emo-

tions, and as if there was but a scant chance of paying the principal when it fell due, let alone keeping up the interest charges. His thoughts became chaotic. They included dear, reliable Donna—his work—Tante, with her spinster's secret—the lovely selfish Stanley—and the sudden idea that there was every excuse in the world to have at least two stiff drinks before taking his first assignment!

CHAPTER VII

HERE was an additional reason why Stanley had dressed in eighteenth-century belle fashion and insisted upon meeting Tante without Blair's escort. Accompanying Tante and her plaid rugs, her London raincoat buttoned up around her wrinkled face, was Mr. Lee Van Zile, three years a widower and returning from a lonely trip abroad. He had gone to Holland in search of ancestors, but the findings had proved so disconcerting that he fled to Paris for thrills which proved expensive and disastrous. He had ended in London for tweeds and some sort of sightseeing which would do to recount at the Dalefield Pendennis Club. Here he had met Tante. Drawn together as solitary pilgrims from the same town, they had not protested when discovering that their homeward sailings were made for the same boat. Secretly, each estimated the other as a bore, but it was better than to have no one to talk to in contrast with the gay intimacies which sprang up among more attractive passengers.

If Tante felt indifferent towards life in general as she stepped into Stanley's cab, Van Zile felt absurdly keen to find some romantic *raison d'être*. To Stanley he was the same mauve-nosed, thick-set little man with whiskers like flying seagulls and features resembling a stub pen. That he wore the latest cut London coat and carried a mink-lined ulster somewhat mitigated any

personal drawbacks. Stanley had been casting about to remember everything she could concerning Lee Van Zile. Although he was a contemporary of her father's, he had not been socially in the same stratum. She conveniently forgot this in remembering Van Zile's fortune, which was the outcome of a wholesale sausage factory.

His first marriage must have led him to expect little joy from any woman—that anemic wife with perpetual head colds! He had had no children—or was there a child or two who had died?—well, that did not matter; his less affluent relatives were not numerous. Moreover, he had overawed them by giving them mortgage money or setting them up in business. Then there was the Van Zile mansion—a combination of Moorish and Tudor architecture, Stanley decided, making a mental *moue*. Van Zile took his mansion seriously. But it could be remodeled to great advantage. She visualized the pompous red brick towers and turrets, the iron grilled doors and windows, two iron stags mounting guard in the front lawn, the shiny pine woodwork, the lack of fireplaces, folding doors which squeaked from lack of use, built-in window-seats which had never been sat upon, cavernous bedrooms and double parlors, library and dining-room which twisted and wound around ornamental pilasters and bay-windows until resembling a string of Van Zile's own sausages! Only the foundation was satisfactory—and as substantial as the owner's income.

All this while she talked in excited tones to Tante, whom she welcomed with astonishing cordiality. Absence and distance are wonder workers. Perhaps Stanley had developed, perhaps she had been too harsh a

critic. Certainly this lovely little creature in her black velvet cloak, no hint of the theater about her, was someone of whom to be proud . . . she *was* like her mother. Tante's honest cheeks flushed as she remembered having once told Millard Ames that his child was a tiny fox woman. Stanley suggested the young matron as they drove up the avenue. She might have stopped at any front door and taken them into the nursery to see her little family before they had tea.

"You're such a dear," Stanley was telling Tante—for Van Zile's benefit. Already he was spellbound, stroking the seagull mustachios with an agitated hand. "So nice to think of you as being back. It hasn't been all beer and skittles but I do feel I've come ahead—you got my notices?"

"And saved them. You were always talented, my child, but I never could decide just in what direction. We're to see you tonight?" Tante was all praise and penitence.

"If you like. Sometimes I hate myself when I look in the dressing-room mirror and see how rouged I am." Stanley now turned to Van Zile. "It is so different than father would have had me—but what is one to do?" with a helpless shrug of the shoulders. "It means bread and butter—sometimes dessert. I've a wonderful salary compared to that of a nursery governess. That's all I could be unless I washed dishes or ran a typewriter. It's an unfair world for poor young things. Poor old things are taken care of in nice places where they have potted plants at the windows and chicken dinners on Sunday and people come and pet them—but poor young things . . . well, we must be Cinderella and do a skirt dance that would shock Dale-

field . . . dear Dalefield," breaking off with a tremor in her voice.

"I remember her distinctly," said Van Zile to Tante as if Stanley were not present. "She came to my house to protest about going to boarding-school. She was like a frightened bird." His stubby features shone with a pleased smile.

"Do you really? I've always remembered the wonderful advice you gave me. Perhaps it has influenced me more than anything else——"

"What *I* said?" Van Zile was distinctly set up by the implication.

Stanley nodded. "He talked to me as father would have done." (Tante was the most convenient *tertium quid* there ever was.) "I was a hateful rebel not wanting school, all grieved and bewildered. But then—that's done with—let's talk about you two and——"

"But you're engaged," said Tante, putting her hand over Stanley's. "Tell me—is he nice enough?"

"I *had* to be engaged," said Stanley with the suggestion of a complaint, her eyes turning to Van Zile. "I had no Tante—no father; the stage isn't the happiest sort of place for a girl like myself. Blair is a blessed protector; he's doing newspaper work now. As an actor he was a success, but as a newspaperman he has only a chance of becoming established—if he doesn't drink," she sighed and looked out the cab windows at the crowded street.

Of late years Van Zile had become a teetotaler and an orthodox Christian—indeed, most of his social contacts were formed through the last medium. He frowned. "No drinking man has the right to marry anyone," he said emphatically. Stanley nodded, noting

how perfectly matched were the mink skins of his greatcoat's lining.

"Perhaps when you know him you can talk to him," she remarked to neither of them—to the cab in general. "He's always promising to be good and he has such marvelous excuses when he isn't."

"You poor little girl," exclaimed Van Zile. "Better come home and get acquainted again."

"I'd only come back to memories," she explained in a saucy, steady voice. "I seldom let myself consider it. Seeing you two brings everything back—father and the old hotel, the sort of life I want and not this mad rush or pretense—ah, here we are," as the brougham stopped before her apartment house and she piloted them into the elevator.

That night Lee Van Zile felt that he had been admitted to paradise. It may have been a shock to discover that his paradise was not of the preconceived tinsel variety for which he had pledged his soul's salvation at a protracted meeting some years ago. None the less it was paradise even if he had to sit through four acts and thirteen scenes of a fairy extravaganza and blush at some of the jokes and frown at some of the dances. For Cinderella herself, in mouse-gray velvet and carefully plaited yellow hair, from the moment she was discovered beside the hearth until she was fitted to the crystal slipper in the king's palace—Cinderella constituted Van Zile's paradise. He had found his *raison d'être*. The boredom and disappointment of Europe and his ancestors, his social inferiority complex, his shy yearning for Indian summer—all these were as nothing: he had found Stanley. She was the most appealing, the loveliest creature in the world.

In his single-track yet sincere brain with its element of shrewd caution, he remembered that she was not merely an alluring young actress but the daughter of a Dalefield aristocrat, penniless and doubly bewitching by reason of her helpless appeal. He would be marrying an Ames—he gave half a chuckle directed at himself for having had the asinine although fleeting thought of how it would seem to marry Maggie Aydelotte because she had been Judge Aydelotte's daughter and would be an efficient housekeeper of his red brick fortress!

He was not old. With new satisfaction he thought of his sound teeth and his ability to bowl two nights a week with a record score. He would shave off those mustachios in the morning; his London clothes put to shame those of the average clubman. He would have his nails manicured, although he had scoffed at this effeminate custom for years. He was only forty-nine—how much kinder that sounded than fifty. He thought of his first marriage with the adoring but colorless Gretchen Schmeitzer whose father had kept a meat market and had failed when Van Zile became his prospering son-in-law. He had never really been in love. He married because he had wanted a family, someone to look after his creature comforts—she had done the best she could. But his children had been still-born while Gretchen became an asthmatic semi-invalid. With his rise in spirits had come his wife's depression in spirits. She felt ill at ease in the red brick mansion; she was homesick for their former cottage with a woodshed in lieu of stables. She had not known how to furnish his home nor dress herself nor entertain new friends. These thoughts flashed through Van Zile's

infatuated brain like the fuse of a fire-cracker which has been lighted and creeps rapidly toward the powder.

He was in love not only with Stanley but with love itself, which did not preclude his remaining in love with himself! As for this drunken newspaper reporter who considered himself engaged to Stanley—that could be taken care of. Nothing should stand in the way of his plans. He found himself planning the jewels he should buy her, the furs, the riding-horse. She should have *carte blanche*—he would even pension this *Tante* of whom she seemed fond. What a hard time it had been for her—how wonderful she was—blood told! He flushed as he thought of the ancestral records he had unearthed in Rotterdam concerning the Van Ziles. Still, he was an American, his back turned upon unpleasant memories. It was enough that Stanley was an Ames . . . a two-carat solitaire in a Tiffany setting and a necklace of matched pearls . . . these would do for a start. . . . Forty-nine but his heart beat as rapidly as at twenty . . . he worshiped her. He would have her painted by the most expensive portrait artist in America . . . he would have a marble bust made of her . . . she should do as she liked about his future. He applauded her last dance until his gloves were ripped.

By the time he had taken Stanley home and she had made them demure midnight tea and toast, murmuring something about the way poor Blair would have demanded something stronger, Van Zile was on the point of proposing. He had sense enough to know how to play his cards but he lacked Stanley-sense—an entirely

different matter. Stanley-sense led her to play ballads to him, to talk of Dalefield and the Lenox Hotel, of her father's and mother's friends to whom she was only a memory. Skilfully, along with romance, Stanley succeeded in weaving a thread of social superiority which proved an antidote to the fact of her being a young actress whose weekly expenses exceeded her salary (she owed Pilgrim for six weeks) and whose engagement to another man was something which must be broken.

At luncheon the next day Blair put in an appearance and received a mild third degree with Tante as prosecutor. Stanley had not asked Van Zile but she had promised to drive down for tea at the Waldorf; she wanted to talk more about her father—would he mind? It had been so long since she had had the opportunity of talking to someone who really knew him. Her father had so admired Mr. Van Zile—oh, dear, yes—he alluded to him as an example of an exemplary citizen.

After she had been at tea and had talked of her father to Van Zile—his answers being a series of admiring phrases—had seen Blair alone before the first curtain, had played to a crowded house of enthusiastic convention delegates, she came back to her apartment and kissed Tante good night, going to her white-dotted muslin and rose draped room to look at herself in her pier mirror. Her ruffled wrapper and braided hair lent a juvenile illusion.

“Well, Mrs. Van Zile,” was her audacious salutation, “I always knew you could do it.”

As she fell into an untroubled sleep, Blair turned

out copy for the last edition and thought of Stanley and wondered if he would ever write the rest of his novel, and if he did—would she bother to read it? Donna was dreaming of Blair and of how she went in search of him in the midst of a raging storm—just why, she did not know.

CHAPTER VIII

A FAIRY godfather being an appropriate acquisition for a Cinderella, the theater caste smiled knowingly as Lee Van Zile's important self, always bearing a florist's box, came to be a familiar figure at the stage door. "Hooked," was the verdict, when Van Zile became a week-end visitor in town. Tante had returned to Dalefield as the rector's secretary and was writing Stanley prosy notes as to the changes she found.

"He seems a second father, Tante dear," Stanley felt it wise to confide by Easter time. "Such a comfort—but Blair is so wildly excited about it. I'm sorry for Blair no matter what he does or what I am forced into doing, but even broad-minded you considered our engagement more of an experiment than a permanent pledge, now, didn't you? I'm sorry Blair sulked when he saw you—it was because of Mr. Van Zile. Being temperamental, perhaps he will always blame me for his having left the stage, but that is the way of a man when he makes a change and it fails to satisfy.

"Now tell me something, you firebrand rector's secretary—does Dalefield know that Lee runs down to play with me so often? (Yes, I call him Lee—and we do play.) I can't have secrets from you, Tante. Listen—he loves me! Are you shocked or happy? Do years, just ugly milestones of years, make a difference?

Never to me. I've always disliked boys—poor Blair will always be boyish—and I've always understood men; they bring out the best in me. I'm afraid I'm beginning to care, too——" and so on for several effusive pages.

All the time Stanley was playing a fascinating game of fox. She knew better than to surrender to Van Zile instanter—the ardent old chap had begged her to marry him three days after they met. To have caused another seven-day wonder in eloping with an elderly upstate millionaire and abandoning young Britton to heartbreak and drink would not have given Stanley the self-righteous thrill of victory she meant to obtain.

She wanted to come into her own, she kept explaining to herself—whatever that might mean. She wanted to leave the stage and have an engraved-cards-and-ten-layer-wedding-cake kind of wedding, trunks of trousseau things and Tante Aydelotte to act as chaperon and maternal substitute; she wanted to be married in church, no less: there were stained glass windows in the cathedral given in memory of her people and the organ itself had been the gift of her paternal grandfather. She wanted Dalefield to welcome her as a future leader of society, thus eradicating any references to the Van Zile slaughter house or the days when she boarded at Mary Dealey's and walked on as a stock company extra.

Van Zile did not suspect this trend of thought. He was occupied with fears lest he be thwarted of his Indian summer. The Dutch stolidity and caution in his nature could not help favoring Stanley's conventional line of action. Van Zile, a fundamentalist of the

first rank with a greed for gain, now found himself longing to possess beauty.

His first wife and early associates had known him as a miserly individual working hard to obtain a handsome obituary in the hometown papers. To be called a pillar of the church and a city father had satisfied him until he began coveting the rank of millionaire. Having achieved this he relaxed in his orthodoxy sufficiently to appreciate a good racehorse, a good dinner, a good boxing match. He fancied that he believed in God as relentlessly as he believed in a seven per cent return on every dollar he invested. If anything cost a thousand dollars he appreciated it; if it was an autumn sunset with russet leaves whirling about to form a frame for the picture, he began figuring how much coal he would need to heat his red brick fortress and to ask his wife to get out his woolens and begin doing up chilli-sauce.

Only when ennui of the soul overtook him and he found no panacea for the malady in a racehorse or a good dinner or a prizefight—or in his stiff-backed fundamentalist front pew or his wife's meekness—only then did Van Zile wonder what he was missing in life and what it would cost to obtain it. For years he had been restless, accusing himself of infidelity when his wife's death left him with a sense of relief. He erected a handsome limestone monument, not unlike Cleopatra's needle, a veritable shaft shooting heavenward and engraved on all sides with his wife's favorite Scriptural quotations. The Van Zile monument became one of the sights of Dalefield, it was almost the first view to be placed upon the new colored postcards.

Left alone, his money and the girth of his waist in-

creasing, his red brick fortress seemed a deserted barracks, his wife's possessions were pitiful, scrawny things not unlike herself. His entire background was repellent—so he closed the brick fortress and went in search of ancestors! Finding worse than none, he came back and found Stanley! Eagerness replaced ennui. Dutch determination plus his bank account combined to make courtship a career and to give Stanley cause for many happy hours' reflection as to what she should do once she was Mrs. Van Zile.

There was the matter of Blair! This bothered Van Zile far more than it did Stanley, for the latter, with characteristic tenacity, had no intention of relinquishing Blair utterly if it was possible to marry a middle-aged millionaire as well. She still wanted to feel that she was essential to Blair. He became a dozen times more desirable as her affair with Van Zile reached the stage of accepting his ring and of promising him in a timid little note written on scented paper that she would marry him as soon as the Cinderella comedy closed its engagement—she might want a wee bit of time to see old friends once more as Stanley Ames.

Van Zile agreed. He had estimated Stanley's alliance with this newspaper blackguard, a man-about-town, he insisted upon considering him, as an unfair trick played upon a beautiful, helpless girl. With difficulty he had been restrained from telling Blair that there was a foreign legion he would better join or the lonely continent of Australia which needed such men as he to bring it into prominence—and to assist him to either destination with money or forcible ejection.

"I know best how to manage poor Blair," Stanley insisted. Not for a moment had she represented her

engagement as other than a protecting armor which she had chosen in her present plight. She had been lonely and alone; Blair had been persistent but a gentleman. She never actually considered marriage—it had remained something to be dealt with on tomorrow's morrow. . . .

He would have been overcome could he have known the workings of Stanley's mind as she rearranged her chess board. She must make Blair feel that marriage would be folly; then she must appear heartbroken, despairing of continuing with any career—admit her flimsy talents to have been exhausted, her health imperiled. Already he had a lover's jealous but contemptuous suspicions concerning Van Zile. Blair's sixth sense enabled him to read new meanings into his lines, to win a beat for his paper five editions out of six, and to give him a morbid, desolate feeling even when he held Stanley in his arms, a warning that he was to be discarded and left to begin again.

"Lee is such a dear," Stanley reiterated when Blair protested. "He was father's closest friend," having satisfactorily magnified the slight acquaintance to suit her present needs. "It is almost like having father again. I'm afraid I'm finding out that I don't belong in New York—I'm merely upstate. I was born to like solid silver that has been in the family, family dinner parties, and even Sunday morning sermons if one has the choice of rector. . . . I don't want to be a gypsy like you—and Donna," skilfully bringing Donna's personality into the picture to act as a bit of a backfire. "You two would go caravaning with a jug of wine and a book of verse, or be content to die at sea and be buried with the boom of cannon for a prayer. I want

a splendiferous funeral—stylish crêpe bonnets and all my in-laws saying nice things about me for once and blankets of roses and pillows of violets and a coffin lined with satin and a monument that costs thousands."

Blair had stopped her mouth with kisses. "You adorable *poseuse*," he denounced. "You'd be bored in no time with that programme. You've only mentioned the high spots. Suppose you didn't die and were doomed to grow stupid and wrinkled and have in-laws say what they really thought. You'd fast enough long for the caravan and a roof-top of stars, death at sea with the boom of a gun for a farewell salute. You can't discourage me that way, Stanley, nor inspire me to compete with Van Zile, if it's Van Zile you're thinking of."

"Can I ever dismiss you?" she had questioned, her cheek laid against his . . . she recalled some of the lines of Van Zile's letter which had reached her only an hour ago.

"If you put it that way, of course. What could I do? Only I've endured my own particular kind of hellfire to get you and——"

"Sssh, we won't begin that, *s'il vous plaît*. The past is past—thanks be! Let Old Man Sacrifice sleep on! Perhaps I ought to dismiss you for your own good—just be friends—always friends, dearest. We don't seem to be getting on, this way, now, do we?"

Blair was on the defensive. "Why begin that sort of thing? Of course we're getting on. I'm doing all that I can. You are not languishing unappreciated. Sometimes I admit that I'm afraid you'll go so far beyond me that I can never catch up—but I'll always try!"

"Let's suppose something was happening to separate us."

"Death would be the only thing, and none of us ought to suppose about it."

"Y-es, but there are other things. Call me pessimist but I've an intuition that we won't belong to each other, after all. At least," she added guiltily, "not just now. Perhaps years later on when we're tired and rather battered we may find each other again—well, stranger things have happened. No, I'm quite all right—I don't need pepsin tablets. It's my brain speaking not my protesting liver! Suppose I marry someone else or you decide you don't love me, just as you did *Donna*? Well, *that* happened, you must admit—humor me that much, won't you?"

"Children love to believe in bugbears, don't they?" stroking her head. "All right—I'll suppose you are married to someone else (rot his bones); now, what's the rest of it?"

"Would you still be my friend?" As she pressed against him he could feel the calm, determined beat of her heart.

"What a question! Good God, I don't know what I'd be or how I'd feel—I'd go running amuck, I suppose. Can't you realize all that you mean to me, Stanley? But you do," he interrupted himself. "You do know—that's where you have the whip-hand."

"Would you still be friends?" she insisted, drawing away, her lips forming into a thin line as if they guarded a secret.

"Oh, yes. I'd probably be fool enough to always be friends. I can't imagine never wanting to see you—

you've become so much a part of my life. I'm probably ridiculous in your eyes——” He walked over to her piano and played disconnected chords.

“How can you say that,” she said softly, “when my ambition is to inspire you? Once there was a man who wanted a woman very much but she married someone else—not because she did not love the man but because it seemed best. After a while, the man, who fancied that his life had ended as far as happiness was concerned, wrote a beautiful ode to her. In so doing he possessed her far more than if they had married and gone to living in a flat with a gas-meter stove and had a muddy-wheeled pram parked in the hall. Yet he never admitted this to the woman who continued to grieve over what he accused her of having done . . . you would admit it, wouldn’t you?”

“What are you driving at?” cried Blair, springing up and coming towards her, his final, crashing chord seeming to quiver into sharp little noises as he walked. “I don’t like you to hedge and suppose. It means that you’ve decided to do something and want me to agree. Darling, please don’t toy with me. Let’s stop supposing and be married, try the flat with the gas-meter stove, and even if the pram wheels are muddy the joy in what the pram contains will be as shining as gold. If we wait I’ll find myself a town character—the man who thinks he is going to marry Stanley Ames. You can make me a novelist or a statesman if you like—with-out you, I’ll be nothing. My fault—but it happens to be me! Don’t fight me off and then send for me to come back, half promising, half retracting.”

After an hour of such dialogue Stanley had sent him away with only half a promise and a whole kiss.

That night Stanley became conveniently ill. She was brought home from the theater by Pilgrim and put to bed. The verdict was nerves—nerves which brought Tante and Van Zile to New York and which kept Blair Britton away. She must have a long and expensive rest was the verdict which reached Blair's ears. Tante had taken her to Dalefield without delay—her understudy at the theater subleasing the apartment. Blair was left to find solace in his room at Mary Dealey's. For three or four days he was absent from the office in a blue funk of discouragement and resentment. He planned to invade this smug little Dalefield and bring Stanley back with him whether or no—all of this torture because he lacked a little money. He would borrow, beg or steal, but he must go to her, convince her that he could provide for her, assert his authority. He was proven a weak fool, for he had failed while she succeeded.

Another woman could not have kept him at arm's length—another woman would not have tried to do so! He found himself going to Donna with his troubles, oblivious of his lack of consideration.

"But she never loved you, boy dear," Donna told him almost shyly. "Stanley wants to find an out; she has taken a common pretext—nerves. That means that she has found a better stepping-stone than you. Oh, Blair, I'd have given my right arm to have spared you."

Looking into her steady eyes Blair began to hate himself on entirely different grounds. He had hurt Donna in order that Stanley might make him a romantic clown. Yet he still loved Stanley. No, it could not be real love but some strange attraction, sinister in spite

of her charm. Or was Donna too tragic, too much the pessimist? When one loved a half-fairy, half-human person ordinary rulings could not be applied. Perhaps he must wait and believe—become a great man as rapidly as possible.

CHAPTER IX

MARCH blew itself into April, and April showered and shone herself into May. Stanley's notes became briefer, less satisfactory as to their contents. Blair's work on the paper increased because of an extra edition. His slight addition of salary made him feel that when Stanley sent for him to come and have a "serious talk," he could tell her that they need wait no longer. They could afford a modest flat and hansom hire, a bunch of violets for Sunday mornings. Stanley could even run away during the heat to stay at some modest resort.

But hastily and omitting many formal details, Stanley married Lee Van Zile on a Tuesday morning the first week in May. It was at high noon and in the cathedral and she wore white satin with an old lace veil. A few friends and fewer of her husband's relatives were in attendance at the quiet hotel breakfast. After which Mr. and Mrs. Van Zile left for a western tour in a private car.

While they were away a regiment of workmen were to take charge of the red brick fortress to remodel and refurnish to the new mistress's satisfaction. Stanley had told Van Zile that the exterior of the mansion was quite all right, only the interior offended. Whereupon he felt his judgment to be impeccable since he had designed the exterior and the late Mrs. Van Zile had

been given authority in the matter of furnishings. Personally Stanley had come to approve the hideous barracks—in time it would be considered a curiosity. Moreover she had a certain carelessness about external appearances which dated from the days of her Lenox Hotel existence. If her immediate appointments were harmonious that was all that was required.

Stanley was a paradox—to her own constant confusion. If she was elusive, she also possessed a heavy mentality in certain ways. Whatever she decided upon must be done or said or become hers at once, no matter what ruthless course had to be pursued. She could not rest until she had succeeded; she would force matters beyond a reasonable point if she had any inkling of defeat. If she was like a china shepherdess in appearance she had something akin to a peasant's endurance. She could wear a soiled dress or *négligé* and have uncurled hair and shabby shoes while planning her most alluring moments. She had written her sweetest love-notes, were the truth known, while wearing a spotted flannel wrapper and having just lunched off cold pork sausage and heavily sugared cups of coffee. An hour later she would reappear in some gossamer drapery, her face so faintly pink and her eyes so bright that one wondered whether she ever descended to eat or drink as did the rest of the human race. If she was diplomatic and tactful, she could turn hysterical bully at a moment's notice—but she always picked her victim with care. She never forgot to economize at the proper time any more than she never forgot to warn Van Zile that she would be a most expensive little wife. She could haggle over the price of a card of hooks-and-eyes or with a second-hand man

but appear bored as to the amount required for an antique carpet. She could listen to the frankest facts and circumstances of life as well as shiver and turn pale if someone began telling scandal or describing a personal disaster. If she was cruel, she was momentarily sentimental and kind-hearted. When she had schooled herself in her own brand of sophistry as to marrying Van Zile and deserting Blair, she found that she did not stop thinking about Blair, she even worried as to his future, his immediate personal needs—far more so than when she had allowed him to consider himself her fiancé. “There are so many *mes*,” she had once said in self-confession. “They all insist on having a chance to come out and play!”

Stanley had ordered herself figuratively to disconnect any contact with Blair as one disconnects a wire at a switchboard. That must be easily done, she believed, for she was acting as sensibly for Blair as for herself. She wrote two letters, one of which she showed to Van Zile and he believed that it was posted instead of being tossed into Tante’s coal grate. The letter which Blair received was anything but the gentle you-almost-trapped-me-but-my-daddy-husband-has-come-to-the-rescue-and-don’t-you-say-one-word-unless-you-wish-to-have-him-to-deal-with-good-bye-forever note of which Van Zile had approved. The posted letter was a terse stating of facts; it allowed one of the “mes” ample scope for expression. Perhaps it was the real me, Stanley thought as she read it over, rather disliking herself if this was the case.

She never wanted to hear from Blair again although she never should forget him, so she had written. She never would have made a satisfactory wife; she was

tired of struggling along in a profession for which she had no decided flair. (Her acting was best done in drawing-rooms and boudoirs; before the altar of Dalefield's cathedral, Stanley mentally postscripted with a curious, onesided smile.) She wanted someone to take care of her; Blair *needed* someone to take care of him —was that not sufficient cause of itself? *Voilà!* He must come to see the wisdom of what she was doing and not make it any harder for her than could be helped. Silence and time would prove the great cure for both, and she loved him—ah, he must not doubt that.

She debated the risk of sending this letter. In the first frenzy of disappointment Blair might forget that he was a gentleman. Still, she would risk it—and keep a keen eye on Van Zile's mail before he should open it. It would have the drastic effect required, and she would trust to her own unnamed saint of petty requests that Blair destroy it. Likely enough, he would drink himself to death—perhaps return to the stage—besides, there was always Donna.

While she tried to feel nothing but amused scorn for them both and relief at being delivered from poverty, a half-jealous, half-curious urge influenced her practical resolves . . . she wished that she could keep Blair as a sentimental friend . . . that he could drop in to have tea-and-regrets, say twice a week. How he would lighten the ponderous gloom of the Van Zile atmosphere! As soon as she had her hands on the Van Zile money—to date it was all promises and presents—she would do something handsome for Blair—perhaps for Donna. It could be managed without their knowing the source. It would salve

her conscience . . . after all, they were sincere. And she had used them shabbily. She despised herself when she thought of it in this light. She was on the verge of writing Donna until Van Zile's gift of a sunburst of diamonds arrived and she allowed another "me" to express itself, a sparkling, heartless "me" that congratulated herself and all other "mes" on having been so clever.

CHAPTER X

WHILE Mr. and Mrs. Lee Van Zile were giving formal at-homes following their bridal tour, Blair Britton was rediscovered and regenerated by Donna. Apparently he had vanished off the face of the earth on the day that he had received Stanley's ultimatum. Newspaper haunts knew him not, stage doorkeepers shook their heads when Donna and others from Mary Dealey's had followed up every clue. He might have taken the first steamer sailing to anywhere, he might have had amnesia, he might have gone to Dalefield to try to see Stanley or jumped off a bridge and become an ugly, hairless thing floating about some wharf. But he had done none of these things although he had thought of all of them—and more. He had gone tramping, tramping, tramping into the foothills or Westchester, drinking, sleeping in barns—finally realizing that he was hungry, penniless and unshorn—with the pathetic forlornity of a lost soul who realizes its own inability to come back.

Ultimately he returned to the only home that he knew. Mary Dealey had waved him up the backstairs, asking no questions and expressing no opinions, slipping out to a corner church to light a candle with a pertinent request for Donna Lovell and Blair Britton and their future.

Donna returned from the theater and found him a

whimpering, feverish creature who called, "Stanley, Stanley," in a high, weak voice and sometimes sprang out of bed and challenged imaginary Lee Van Ziles. Then he would fall into a crumpled, ridiculous heap and be lifted back into bed by some of Mary Dealey's acrobatic boarders.

It was midsummer before he was well enough to take mental inventory of the past and try to plan for a future. (In Dalefield the Van Ziles were giving tallyho parties and week-ends at their lake cottage.)

"I'm not worth all this fuss and bother," Blair told Donna, half in apology, half in the hope that she would contradict him. "Anyone who is so easily duped must be damnable weak. The worst of it is that I'd still choose alcohol rather than will-power. I don't want to go back to the theater; I want to tramp about in search of police court stories and sob stuff and sit in midnight poker games and joke with cheap women and drink until I forget. God forgive me for a fool but I love her still; damn it, I can't forget her . . . I can't be sure that I hate her," burying his white, peaked face in shaking hands.

Donna had gathered him into her arms; she had gathered Stanley in similar fashion in the days at Miss Masters's finishing school. She thought of this as she steadied Blair.

"I love you," she told him slowly. "I know that means nothing in comparison with what you have lost. We can't explain why we keep on loving someone when we ought to stop or why we can't keep on when we'd really like to. It's life, Blair—so let's be friends and face it together—let's know there must be a reason somewhere."

"I love her," he admitted in bitter defeat, "yet she has cheated you and killed the best of me. She, who cannot love anyone."

"Sometime she will love someone—then she may remember and understand." There was anger as well as pity in Donna's voice.

"Sometime I'll get to hate her." He spoke as if it were a gigantic task ahead. "But I don't want to go back to regular living just yet. I'll be ready to turn beachcomber if I'm forced. I've no purpose, Donna, and even a wrong purpose is better than none. Why do I tell you this, you, who have cared through it all? Donna, you are so strong and because of your strength you have had to suffer." In despair he laid his head on her shoulder.

"We'll work it out together," she whispered. "You sha'n't slip back nor turn beachcomber. You must find a right purpose. You sha'n't even hate her—you can do better than that: you can forget her."

"Be my friend, my true comrade," he begged; "steady me for j-just a bit . . . I need you. I'm ashamed when I call out like this. But I'll go mad unless I've someone to be near."

"Need me? I'm happy! There, do you see how much I care—I'm selfishly glad that your sorrow turns you to me. We'll begin again as friends—just friends."

That same week Stanley had decided there was little use planning on Van Zile's future. Blair's letter having caused neither suicide nor blackmail, she had fancied that Van Zile might become her next absorbing interest in life. Besides money, he had a certain type of brains—no principles but a conventional conscience. With the seagull mustachios removed he was rather

impressive. She had decided that he enter the political arena—the mayor—the governor—who knows?—even the White House might not be an altogether wild hope?

After due consideration, which no one suspected, she abandoned the idea. Van Zile could only become the stodgy backer of someone else. This would afford Stanley no personal outlet. He was too limited, too much in love. Yet she was not disappointed. Being the bride of an enraptured husband was not as hard as being a half-charity pupil or living at Mary Dealey's or hedging along with Blair. The old life seemed far away; she had to pinch herself to believe that it had ever existed.

Dalefield had adopted the attitude which any well-behaved industrial center adopts towards a daughter of an old family and a nouveau-riche millionaire. "An ideal marriage—dear little Stanley needed someone to look after her—her father had spoiled her—Van Zile was so interesting"—etc., etc. Under Stanley's tutelage, Tante's backing and Van Zile's checkbook, Dalefield ignored Stanley's stage career. It mentioned her as an esthetic dancer and referred to Van Zile's business as a wholesale meat packer.

With scarcely an exception Dalefield welcomed the Van Ziles. At tea tables the difference in their ages, the rumor of Stanley's former engagement to a newspaper reporter, the story that Van Zile ate in his kitchen and off an oilcloth covered table, were whispered now and then—but who did not whisper something about the latest celebrities?

"Van dear," Stanley had said easily after she had decided that he could afford her no thrilling career

other than spending his money, "you are a great man buried in an obscure town."

"You're prejudiced, my darling," he responded. I don't consider myself buried—I'm just beginning to live. If I had you—oh, say we had been twenty-one together—I might have gone farther than you would believe."

"You could have done *anything*," asserted Stanley solemnly, her eyes very sparkling and elongated. "And now, my dear, you will please sell those beastly sausage grinders and buy something worth while—oh, a newspaper or a few theaters or some shops——"

"Gad, are you going to make a gentleman of me?" Van Zile beamed at the prospect. "But I don't know anything about 'em—have to know your line even if it's that of a harlot," chuckling again at his coarse philosophy.

Stanley frowned. "I don't like sausage factories," she pouted. "But *you* are wonderful," laying a small hand on one of his thick, red palms and letting him close his fingers over it. "Don't you want to own a newspaper or an art shop?"

"No, I don't," admitted Van Zile. "I'll keep the sausage grinders and let you dabble about with what I earn—how's that?"

"I don't want to unsettle you or attempt to persuade you. Besides, I couldn't," she added softly. "You are the one to make important decisions and I to abide by them because they're certain to be wise. But I want you to begin to express yourself, to do something that would develop your talents. Still, if you believe that you ought to keep the business——"

"See here," said Van Zile with Dutch candor, "I

know my business and I don't want to retire nor change it. I want to live for a long time and love you. I want to die a multimillionaire. I can do it making sausages better than expressing myself, as you put it. Oh, I can afford to play a good part of the time. I may be in your way—I'll hang around so much. I'll double your allowance if you won't ask me to part with the sausage grinders again," he glanced at the newly furnished drawing-room with its apricot colored draperies and velvet and rosewood chairs, the great pipe organ with its mysterious gilt reeds. There were long-stemmed roses in crystal jars and tables of inlaid woods, carved cabinets filled with ivories and ceramics for it was the day of *bric-à-brac*. For all its ornateness the room was a place of beauty. None of the rooms betrayed any evidence of their former mistress who had favored whatnots and antimacassars, yellow plush box-rockers, enlarged crayons of family groups framed in curlicue gilt and even gilded rolling pins mutilated with little hooks upon which nothing ever was or ever could be hung but which furnished the excuse for the rolling pins to be suspended on red velvet streamers above archways and doors.

Even Dalefield lifted its eyebrows at the modern furnishings employed by young Mrs. Van, as she begged to be called. Polished floors and rugs, mind you, and electricity in every room, tile baths and telephones both up and downstairs and there was a rumor that Mrs. Van's apartment had a perfumer which worked automatically and accounted for the fragrant odor of Parma violets which surrounded her like a pale aura!

The family Bible and gift books which used to be

piled with awesome precision on top of clawfoot walnut tables were also missing, so were the silver tankards and swinging water pitcher which once graced the black walnut buffet. Sheraton and Chippendale, a Governor Winthrop desk and a Queen Anne bedroom set took precedence these days. Greyhounds lay in graceful, dusky colored snarls before open fireplaces, and a small white poodle with a quilted satin blanket who went riding with Mrs. Van answered to the compromising name of Nero.

As Van Zile glanced at his transformed drawing-room—he still felt something of a stranger, to be quite truthful—he thought briefly of the equally perfect appointments which the rest of the rooms contained.

“Let my sausage grinders alone,” he advised, still clinging to Stanley’s small hand.

This was exactly what Stanley had wanted; to pretend that he might attempt some impossible career, the very sound of which would be a challenge for him to defend his sausage factory—and to gradually succumb to his wiser judgment, admitting that she was a visionary little silly until, flattered and doubly sure of himself, Van Zile would increase her allowance and leave her free to pursue a new goal. Had she urged a lumber yard or part interest in a smelting works, he might have been tempted. But bookstores and theaters were for long-haired, short-brained tea hounds. Van Zile was satisfied that Stanley had bowed to his judgment.

He was dismayed to find himself strangely fagged when Stanley dragged him from party to party—places where a husband was either a convenience or a neces-

sity. Subtly she drove home the fact that he was welcomed everywhere only since his second marriage. Sometimes she took care to leave him at home—when there were to be amusing “long-haired, short-brained tea hounds.” Sometimes this same variety came to the Van Ziles’ to play the piano or sing about the moon and nightingales. Altogether too heavy these days, a purplish coloring in his cheeks, Van Zile would applaud ponderously and look longingly towards the supper table.

He never knew that Stanley’s good-natured contempt almost amounted to pity. He so believed in her that it was more or less of a burden, she told herself during reminiscent moments when she was wondering about Donna and Blair—they had believed, too. What would have happened had she stayed on in New York and lived in two rooms and a half with Blair?

At times Dalefield became stupid in spite of her being its most popular young matron. The boys—her pet geese she called them—flocked at the slightest nod of her golden head; she flirted with married men with discreet innocence; middle-aged bachelors were her specialty. Van Zile delighted in it.

“They’re all wild about you, Stan,” he would say after the company had gone and they were in their overpowering apartment with the Queen Anne furniture and the antique carpet that had cost a check of four figures.

Only once had he called her “Stan” in public. Her rebuke had been so stinging and direct that Van Zile’s surprised brain whirled in trying to decide if he had heard aright.

A second rebuke had been given due to his em-

barrassing personal confessions. Titled guests were stopping over for a day and Van Zile, uncomfortable yet proud, took the bit into his teeth and insisted upon denouncing himself.

"I'm not afraid to say I'm just a sausage maker," he began, thus disarming them of any such inference. "Mrs. Van does all the hifalutin' stuff. My people came from Rotterdam—a good thing they knew enough to come, too. Well, I've made a fortune and married the most beautiful woman in America and if anyone laughs because I don't know parlor tricks, I guess I can laugh a little louder for their not knowing some other kinds."

He paused as he caught sight of Stanley's white face, her eyes sharp, shining sword-points.

"You're an old precious," she had said in the same tone of annoyed affection used when the greyhounds jumped upon her with muddy paws. She began telling her guests about the years she had spent abroad with her father.

When they had gone Stanley delivered an ultimatum concerning any more such revelations. "No one is going to make fun of you in your own house and to your face—few of us can ask for more. But if you ever again sit at the head of your table, your face wreathed in a greasy grin, saying such ill-bred commonplaces, I shall leave the room. No one will laugh at you—but they will pity me."

Van Zile accepted the rebuke with the same grace that the greyhounds did the cut of Stanley's riding-whip.

"But it is true," he had protested. "Damn it, title or no title, they are human enough to know it. I guess

you better teach me your ways, Stanley—I'll promise to keep on loving you even if I can't learn 'em."

It soon came about that the Van Zile household consisted of Stanley and her housekeeper; the trick poodle, Nero; a hairless spaniel, Sinner; her prize mount, Silverheels; her pseudo-aunt, Tante, whom she patronized and bullied as her mood willed, and her husband! She never made the mistake of treating him with open contempt. Such crudeness might have invited a display of Van Zile's temper—a thing against which she had been warned. She managed him so that he fancied he was lord of all he surveyed and the king of her heart.

"But I have no heart, Tante," she confessed one winter evening after a dinner party in the newly frescoed banquet hall. "I've only a nice little jewel-box in the corner where my heart ought to be. Instead of affectionate beats it is always asking, asking, asking for one more treasure—that's the sort of 'heart' I have." She had fallen into a habit of telling Tante what she really thought. It seemed necessary to have such a confidante. Tante was aging and her income was shrinking, rheumatic trouble kept her more or less invalided and she was content to spend waited-upon days in Stanley's house. She seldom expressed herself. An ironic smile crossed her finely cut lips as she watched Stanley impressing her guests or unexpectedly berating her servants, changing from the immaculate, frail girl-wife into a frowsy, wiry, quick-tempered woman. Perhaps Stanley amused more than she displeased. Having asked little from life yet having received nothing, perhaps Tante had come to where she was content to be amused.

She seldom contradicted Stanley when the latter belittled herself. Stanley would have resented it had she done so. She had nothing to gain from Tante so that she could afford to be honest; it soothed her to admit that she had been selfish or snobbish or heartless as a good Catholic comes into spiritual alignment after the confessional.

"Do you ever hear from Blair—the man you were once going to marry?" Tante once asked somewhat disconnectedly.

"Never, thank heaven," Stanley replied. "At first I was positive that I would have a time with him. Then I grew curious as to just how he took it—beastly of me, isn't it? Now I've settled away and convinced myself that all is well. He never found me out, at that—that I had a greedy jewel-box instead of a flesh-and-blood heart. I can't quite forget him—but that's a bad habit of mine. By the way, Tante, I'm to have a child—I really ought to check up on myself. I'm wondering if he'll be like Lee, a monotonous little soul sure to get seven per cent on investments, or if he will be like me—cheating and selfish and covered with a veneer of smiles. . . . I'd never want anyone to be like me—I know what it means to have to live with myself. Sometimes I'm to be pitied."

"Are you certain about—the child?" Tante was startled from her usual trend of thought.

"Quite certain. I must prepare to grow old," Stanley added in an agony of self-revelation. "I'll find myself being all the self-effacing, wonderful, thankless things any mother finds herself. If I die, I'll be an idealized memory . . . I don't know but what that would be kinder for the child. Yet I want to live and live—

and live," her lips setting themselves in a determined, thin line.

Tante saw the future as Stanley was omitting to outline it. Stanley wanted a man child because he would be someone of her own to dominate and possess, then keep to herself as an antidote to age and the inevitable ending of her sex appeal. Unconsciously, she frowned her disapproval.

"Does Van Zile know?" was her next question.

"I told him today," Stanley's face was amused. She was remembering his clumsy alarm. Heretofore she had been able to do as she liked with his money. Now that she was to bear him a child—fruit of June and December—she could do anything that she liked with Van Zile. But she was no longer interested. She wanted her son. Life had taken on a deeper meaning. Her father, Blair, Van Zile, were mere stepping-stones to this glorious goal—a man child who would be hers, all hers, forever hers. . . .

"Be as kind to him as you can," urged Tante. "Don't let him see how you find him in the way."

"You to champion Van—you who derided him and thought him the sort that ought to go to the back door—come, you know you did! You may have lost most of your hair and teeth but never your snobbery. I expect you to teach your grandnephew how to snub! That and knitting bootees ought to give you a new lease on life. As for Van, I intend to be as I always have been. It is not likely that his child will know him," she added, her face a study in ambitious determination. "Van will be a splendid memory for the boy—with a good-looking monument to visit on state occasions. But the boy will be mine—*mine*—oh, I'm happy, Tante." Bright stars

shone in the green eyes as she kissed the older woman.

The next day she wrote a generous check for a baby crèche and began ruminating as to how she could still do something equally generous for Donna and Blair, a sort of pre-offering of thanks and a tardy penance combined. Now that she was to become a mother she wanted to be as successful in the rôle as she had been in those of fiancée, artiste, old man's bride. As for Van, he could not last five years. Already his step was uncertain and his blood pressure high. Anyone can be kind to someone who has given them the keys of heaven (and their safety box) but who is not apt to linger long enough to witness the latter's unlocking.

CHAPTER XI

THAT summer Stanley's son was still-born. Rumor had it that young Mrs. Van Zile collapsed and had to be taken abroad.

When she returned to Dalefield—having merely passed through New York—the red brick fortress was overflowing with surprise gifts of welcome. New terriers barked a greeting and a bay mare for riding was in the stable. An indoor swimming-pool had been built and the conservatory enlarged in order to include a room for orchids. On the second floor was a small art gallery. Here were several canvases which Stanley had languidly admired while abroad and which her husband had afterwards purchased and shipped to Dalefield. A pigeon-blood ruby pendant on a chain of small diamonds lay on her dressing-table—for it was the third anniversary of their marriage. Dalefield itself was waiting to welcome her. Society needed Mrs. Van's personality. Van Zile's business had been sidetracked for over half a year while he went obediently with his distracted young wife from capital to cathedral town, Alpine resort to the Italian lakes, coaching through Spanish hamlets, sailing up to the bleak charms of Breton fishing villages, ending in London while April made Hyde Park a confusion of hawthorne and roses and the opera house saw the Van Ziles occupying one of its choicest boxes.

She was doomed to return sometime, Stanley had begun telling herself—why delay? If she had made Van Zile adore her by giving him a child she had made him an abject slave by having lost the child. His pity as well as his pocketbook were laid at her restless little feet. Sometimes she loathed this aging, purplish-faced man who found that to speak in monosyllables suited better than his formerly long and ungrammatical speeches. Sometimes she shuddered lest Van Zile should find her out. Was it an inherited taint which caused this ruthless deceit and wilfulness? Some people are born with defective limbs or organs—she was born with defective character. A sense of failure continued to madden her. She had been denied the thing dearest to her heart—and which money could not buy. Another unwelcome thought was that this might be retribution for the death blow she had dealt Donna's happiness and Blair's ideals.

Then she read of Donna's success in *Rosmersholm* and the *Lady of the Sea* and the announcement that Miss Lovell was to appear in London the following season. At least Donna had advanced in her career—a more satisfactory goal to fox for, after all. She even envied her. As for Blair—somehow she could not visualize Blair. She continued to relive those hours of agony followed by the whisper that her son had not opened his eyes. It was cruelly unfair. She was young, talented, clever—tied to a doting old man in a stupid town. What could bring back the zest for playing the game?

Against Van Zile's wishes and Tante's advice, in June, 1897, Stanley became a mother for the second

time. New York's best equipped hospital with its staff of specialists at her beck and call. The middle-aged husband, tremulous and pathetic in trying to understand his wife's trend of thought, was told again that his son was still-born. Due to a discovered spinal weakness his wife must not give birth to a third child.

"But her reason will leave her," he protested with the hysteria common to his stolid type. "My God, we can't let her waken to find her arms empty."

Tante, who had come to New York as general counselor, confirmed Van Zile's prophecy.

The overworked surgeon was professionally sorry. Nothing could be done; the boy was dead, the woman physically unsound. It was midnight.

"She must not find that her arms are empty," Van Zile kept repeating.

"One can adopt—" said Tante timidly.

The surgeon seized upon the suggestion. "True—still, there are obstacles, it must be a newborn boy with a negative blood-test—that is only common sense. There must be secrecy—"

"Money can do it," Van Zile's face was mottled with emotion. "My poor little Stanley—she must never know—"

"I don't know but what there is—let me see—" began the surgeon as if something occurred to him.

"Tell her that it is all right; tell him that he must find a child—no price will be too great," this time Van Zile was nearing a collapse. Roughly he shoved Tante towards the surgeon. "My wife must have a son—do you hear me—a son—she must never know—"

"Take him away," ordered the surgeon. "Then come down to the superintendent's office. These are the

facts which may interest you: a child was born to-day—a boy of unmarried, refined parents. The mother died. The boy is a healthy, well-endowed infant, I am inclined to believe. The mother was an actress who gave of love too generously to a selfish man. The man is frantic with the usual remorse and passing grief—I know no other details except that the boy is up for adoption, the father wishes never to see him nor hear of him. Perhaps that boy—seeing that the mother died—perhaps, with caution and some money, it can be arranged, hurried a little—”

“It must be—it sounds plausible—and her reason will go. She has never been denied anything,” urged Tante.

“Mr. Van Zile is willing to assume all responsibilities?” questioned the surgeon with professional deliberation.

“Anything that will please her—anything,” confirmed Tante. She was thinking of the night that Stanley’s mother had died. She had been with Millard Ames just as she was with Stanley who, half-conscious, dreamed that her child stirred in her arms.

The next day, Stanley became aware of a mottled young son feebly moving a wrinkled fist and looking at least a thousand years old. To her pain-blurred eyes he seemed a god in embryo.

“Your son, Mrs. Van Zile,” said an imperturbable nurse.

“Our boy, dearest,” whispered Van Zile, afraid to speak aloud.

“A fine, healthy lad,” added Tante in an emotionless voice.

Stanley raised her eyes. “I’m so happy,” she said

gently. To herself, as her hand stole over to find the beat of the new heart: "I knew that I would not fail; I never do. Darling precious, *you belong to me!*"

Outside the room Tante again attempted to tell Van Zile the story of the adoption, but he waived her aside with the air of one too concerned with great things to be detained by lesser ones. All that he cared to know was that his wife had the wish of her heart—a son. To him the boy meant little—the emotion of parenthood had been deflected in his ambition to marry Stanley. Very likely this boy would do well enough, that he was a mysteriously circumstanced foundling was all the better—there would be no comeback. Tante had seen to everything. For the time being, Tante had taken the first papers, Van Zile to readopt him later on. Tante could be trusted. All that he had done was to sign a check.

Only Tante knew that young Ames Van Zile, the millionaire baby, as the evening papers had it, was the unwanted son of Blair Britton and Donna Lovell. The latter had died without knowing that she left him to a repentant, helpless man whose one plea was: "Take the child away, give him away, never let me see him . . . Donna, what have I done? What have I done?"

So Ames came to Dalefield to rule over the world in general while his beautiful little mother began her rule over him!

CHAPTER XII

THE first triumph of possessing a son being exhausted and the days of creeping and second-summer ailments succeeded by those of kilts and kites, Stanley began casting about for temporary diversion until Ames was ready to take his place at her side.

Dalefield offered nothing diverting beyond the usual social affairs, a political campaign aided by Van Zile's money, concerts, and the privilege of entertaining the clergy.

Periodically Stanley demanded that something dramatic happen. She admitted to Tante that she was more the actress than the aristocrat. True, there was her handsome young son who dared to hurl his four-year-old invectives against his nurse and who stampeded the drawing-room to grasp his mother's lace frock in sticky tyrannical hands, demanding that everyone else exit as hastily as if there were a fire alarm. But Stanley wished to remain Ames's ideal. It was wiser that his discipline came from hirelings while his mother remained a fairy-tale person who called him endearing names and held him in her soft, warm arms that reminded him of white violets with the sun shining on them. There were a number of monotonous years ahead before Ames would be ready to create a background. In the interim Stanley must not become too bored.

She had no desire to travel until she could show Ames the Old World. New York was a place to be avoided. She had learned of Donna Lovell's sudden death by reading the critics' tributes to her talent. Blair was undoubtedly swallowed up in the changing mass of humans who appeared and disappeared, failed and succeeded. Characteristically she found herself wondering if he was the same temperamental idealist (and as good-looking to boot). She almost wished that she might decoy him to Dalefield. In this secure setting—with the right sort of a mousegray satin frock—she felt that she could enjoy being forgiven! She could appear sufficiently unhappy to be alluring. Within a moment she could tell whether or not her powers were still paramount.

This being impossible, since Blair might have married or turned Trappist, why waste her time in phantasy? Already she had a reputation extending to London as a collector of postage stamps, having chosen this hobby because it brought one into contact with interesting personalities. Stanley loved types. Anything in the line of abnormal humanity intrigued her, no matter how appalling. Her curiosity regarding abnormalities equaled that of a medical student. She was a regular visitor at the state hospitals, homes of correction and city jails—everyone knew the attractive "little lady" with her generous checkbook and charming smile, her bright green eyes watching derelicts and degenerates as eagerly as a bird-dog points his prey. It stimulated her—this contrast between her own security and the remnants of what were once human beings. Expressing herself to the attendants she was always "so sorry for them, so terribly depressed, in

hopes that a turn for the better might be taken," etc. . . .

The occasional amateur theatricals were an ordeal at best. There were the deadly pilgrimages to mineral spring resorts, mostly of the slightly *passé* variety which Van Zile remembered as being the height of fashion.

On the morning of her thirty-second birthday, Stanley lingered before her pier glass. It was not to admire the emerald bracelet Van Zile had pushed towards her when she brought him his morning paper (he was having a bad time with a swollen knee) but to take inventory of herself as mercilessly as of some rival.

The girlish, ethereal charm that had deceived Blair and won her husband was replaced by a somewhat substantial, matronly beauty. In 1902 the advent of the matron-flapper had not even sounded a warning to the châtelaines of the Welsbach era. One could become a trifle plump of figure, wearing one's hair in heavy coils or in an awe-inspiring pompadour, and be considered none the worse for it. Stanley's chin had squared itself somehow although the dimples remained in their strategic positions. Despite the pink-and-white contour there was a settled, triumphant expression.

She played lady bountiful to every charity in town, no matter what its creed. When it was below zero she served hot coffee and doughnuts for the policemen and streetcar employees, supplying iced lemonade for the same when the mercury neared a hundred in the shade. Every clerk who served her was remembered at Christmas. There was no one to tell on her! Stanley com-

forted herself with this thought on her thirty-second birthday morning—no one but poor Tante whose sardonic, wrinkled face was as inscrutable as a mask. Stanley bent nearer to examine the shadow of a facial defect. As she patted her cheek with her small, square-tipped fingers, she heard Ames's feet scampering down the hall with his nurse in pursuit.

She stopped self-contemplation long enough to enjoy a thrill of pride. In a few years, what an interesting game she would play with her son—far more intriguing than being the apparent heroine herself. She would fade as artistically as withered daffodils. She would have an obscure not obnoxious ailment. There was great opportunity in the verdict of the New York surgeon who had attended her when Ames was born—a spinal defect. She had willingly sacrificed her health, jeopardized her very life that she might have her son! (But she would keep the bulk of the Van Zile money in her own hands.) Her postage stamp collection would have tripled in value: she might go in for collecting uncut stones. With such a background and such a mother Ames should become the man of the hour, Stanley beside him to direct his genius.

For the intervening years—She went to the busy-looking little desk and hunted for her best notepaper. In another moment she had written to one Anthony Monroe, in care of the Buckingham Studios, Dalefield. Would he call as soon as possible? She wanted his opinion as to doing over some rooms in the house. Sealing it with rose colored wax, she sent it off by the coachman.

She then abandoned esthetic plans for a few mo-

ments while she became absorbed in the pursuit of moths. She poked and pried and pounded in her fur closet, sending out to air her chinchilla and ermine capes, her sealskin, her sable set, Van Zile's mink-lined ulster and Ames's squirrel reefer . . . her hair became stringy and her face red and perspiring. She enjoyed routing out any trespassers—her maid was amused at the vigor she displayed.

"They can't escape *me*, Katie," she remarked as the girl staggered out under the last batch.

Still disheveled, she sat down to go over her accounts, eating altogether too many bonbons for that hour of the morning—a bad habit of hers which alternated with the drinking of port or ale unbeknownst to the household—read the papers to find out the developments in the last murder mystery, used a facial cream and while waiting for it to be absorbed found herself planning how she would break into her own house were she a burglar. From this flight of fancy, she outlined a bold career of theft, arson, even the slow poisoning of a perfectly useless old party who was holding up everyone else. She often indulged in this sort of phantasy which proved more satisfying than the average mystery novel. She telephoned Tante and asked her to come in later in the day, rushed into Van Zile's room to see to his needs, came back and dressed for a public luncheon, a charity affair where both food and speeches would be intolerable.

As she tripped down the steps, the coachman glanced with approval at her violet chiffon with its complicated trimmings of appliquéd flowers and the tricorne black Milan hat centered with a brilliant buckle.

Returning from the lunch, she stifled a yawn as she

prepared to go in and read to Van Zile. But she was saved by the butler's announcing that a Mr. Monroe was waiting in the library.

Stanley gave a pleased sideglance at herself. She could not have staged it better. She unpinned her corsage of orchids; they seemed too ultra for home display. She would carry them in her hands as if in search of a vase. This would preclude her having or not having to shake hands with this tall, black-mustachioed man immaculate in a frock coat and lavender pin-striped trousers, whose pale, aristocratic features and piercing black eyes seemed to label everything he looked upon as either "possible" or "impossible."

Dalefield had not rejoiced that Monroe had come to be one of them. There were many drawing-rooms and libraries like those of the Van Zile house before its transformation. Dalefield hesitated at being ordered to send for second-hand men so that Mr. Monroe might proceed unhampered. It would seem a public acknowledgment of poor taste despite plumpness of pocket-book. The bourgeois had banded together and said en masse: "You are most unusual, Mr. Monroe; indeed, we do need art in Dalefield but why not start a class in design or something to which we can send our children?" A few accused him of laughing at them, of being an affected fop because of the years spent abroad.

It was not until his wife with their baby daughter, Telva, had arrived, and become settled in the Buckingham Studios that Dalefield realized Mrs. Monroe's antecedents. She was one of a trio of famous sisters—aristocratic New Orleans belles whose ancestry was of the proudest and poorest of the Creoles. The eldest

daughter of Pierre Thibadaux, pecan planter, collector of rugs, gentleman, had married a multimillionaire from the Middle West, redeeming his lacks by living abroad in a remodeled château. The youngest daughter, after several seasons of popularity, had married a title from one of the smaller Latin countries, while the in-between sister, Lucille, while visiting her elder sister in Paris, had met and married Tony Monroe, an Anglo-Indian art student whose American mother had devoted the best years of her life in covering up the fact that her girlhood had been spent in Indiana. Orphaned at sixteen, due to an Indian skirmish and a fever epidemic, Tony had wandered about Europe with sufficient talent and personality to become a favorite in the ateliers, now taking a disastrous whirl at business due to some uncle's advice, now running off to Normandy with art students, now in love with some older woman, now breaking some younger person's heart—painting a little, writing a little, playing a great deal, finding himself at thirty-five with no greater assets than his distinguished appearance and the ability to assemble colors and objects and achieve a right effect.

He married this Creole belle because it was expedient. He wished to come to his mother's country. A wife as admirably connected as Lucille would facilitate matters. She was so much like him in appearance that many took them for brother and sister. Lucille was quite as tall and thin, as sallow of skin and black of hair. She also had a Roman nose and eyebrows so heavy as to be described as "beetle." She wore exotic, flowered robes and Oriental jewelry, her voice was low and deep and she lacked what her husband excelled

in—a sense of humor. A devout churchwoman, Lucille was as orthodox in viewpoint as she was unorthodox in dress, her hobbies being altar linens and genealogies. An authority on ecclesiastical matters, she had written several brochures on obscure saints and their difficulties in being canonized.

Jealously in love with Tony, Lucille had undertaken to launch him in his new career. When her family rejected Monroe she had quarreled with them and left for Washington. The Thibadaux family considered Monroe a poseur, he had neither the fortune nor the position of the other sisters' husbands and his fawning upon the rich for a livelihood was repellent to those old Creoles who lived in a barn-like building, its flowery courtyard hidden by forbidding looking gates.

In Washington Monroe had become the vogue. New York beckoned a finger. Monroe would have obeyed the New York gesture but his wife detested New York and all things Northern—even Washington was too bustling and cosmopolitan. During Lucille's convalescence after her child was born, Monroe found consolation in flirting with a divorcée whose handsome income enabled her to enjoy the society of those who gossiped about her.

Her jealousy inflamed, Lucille's temper flared into action. Monroe heard the ultimatum. If she was to remain his wife he must select some conservative city where his loyalty would remain untempted.

Why disrupt the one steady influence in his life? He was jaded as far as romance was concerned—there was the child—and his poverty—

Within a few weeks the Monroes came to Dalefield.

By degrees Dalefield was admitting the poor taste of its drawing-rooms.

"So good of you to come at once," Stanley began with a boyish nod of the head, her bright green eyes animated as she peered up at Monroe's face.

"Nice of you to send for me," he responded.

"Please sit down; I've a lot to tell you—almost as much as you will have to do," with a deprecating shrug of her shoulders. "When I came here to live—it was quite awful!"

"I can imagine," sympathized Monroe. "I've seen several places which might have been its blood relations—I mean from the exterior."

"Mr. Van Zile is so wonderful in his own sphere," even more confidentially and ringing for tea. "But I sha'n't begin about him or we shall never get down to our subject. He's spoiled me as much as he has disciplined himself. Picture his career—a penniless little Dutch lad who had to learn our language, begin at the very beginning of the beginning, yet who emerges a man of prominence and actually liking silly little me!"

Before Monroe could take exception to this, Stanley swept on: "I've half an idea that you don't work like the ordinary common or garden variety of decorator. They have a questionnaire on their cuff, so to speak, and ask how much money you are prepared to spend and then how much more you will permit their spending. They go at things like a carpenter building in cupboards—slam, bang, saw, varnish—*voilà!* We are done; your recommendation in the future—my bill for the immediate past. . . . I imagine that you study the person who lives in the house before you are deeply concerned about the house proper—does it

sound a trifle occult for Dalefield?" in a stage whisper.

"You're delicious," chuckled Monroe. "I've met no one so delicious since——"

"Not Paris, please," begged Stanley. "Americans have ruined it."

"Since Vienna," he finished swiftly.

"You're delectable," she rewarded. "Dalefield will never know what to do with you. But am I not right? I mean about both things: you *do* study the mistress of the house in order to orient her in it rather than decide that the drawing-room is to be silver brocade and azure-blue and the dining-room smothered by tapestries . . . it's a daring way to work, but I adore daring people. I adore honesty even if it is brutal and devastating. To continue: if the mistress of the house proves insignificant or worse, she finds herself at-home in her re-done house because it has been furnished to suit her. But the world has a merciless portrait of her as they step inside the door. In other words, you interpret people when you 'do over' their homes. And I dared send for you!" She busied herself with the tea things, augmenting the tea with rum à la Russe and surprising Monroe with caviare on wisps of toast instead of the usual Dalefield sugar tarts.

"If I can interpret you," he began, "I shall consider——"

"Ssh—not yet, not quite yet." Stanley was stimulated. Monroe was the antidote she craved—the clever, dangerous sort of personality to counteract the reality of Van Zile's invalid routine and Dalefield's plush-and-ingrain activities. He was Blair plus experience and cynicism. She admired his hair and eyes, the Roman

nose, those high, flat cheek-bones not unlike a Navajo Indian's. He was a man of the world—Blair had been a tempermental boy in danger of going to the dogs one moment and trying to vault the very gates of heaven the next.

"I warn you that I am spoiled," she began again. "I have had everything I want—a rather sorry state of affairs! I have made this house one of my toys—it could easily have been a prison," with an unexpected quiver in her voice. "I've had a forlorn sort of life; I never knew a mother but I worshiped my father. When he died—I went to a 'papa-potatoes-prunes-and-prisms' finishing school as a charity pupil——"

Monroe sipped his rum-and-tea and nibbled caviare as he listened to Stanley's latest version of her life. She was telling him because he was different and she was still so alone. Her boy was in the nursery; her husband was president of a sausage factory and director in two or three banks—yet Monroe could understand all that he was not. Monroe was "fey"; she had surmised as much when she entered the room!

Having talked all about herself—what of him? How did he stand Dalefield? Could his wife endure it? She had been timid of calling. Yes, she was a timid person but she had been obliged to conceal the fact. She was both simple and uninteresting once one knew her—and incurably honest. Did he mind? Most people did. But he was an artist, and art and truth were one and the same. As she talked her capable, square-tipped little fingers were demurely folded in her lap. The beautiful rings flashed strange rainbow lights due to the sun streaming through the windows. She was thirty-two to-day, but feeling only twenty at times and at least

ninety-seven at others. . . . She never felt just thirty-two; it was a dull age, a time of losing the first back tooth or being expected to forego dancing for reading courses. Boys began to tell one their love-affairs. . . . Mon Dieu, who could wish even an enemy to be thirty-two! Forty was when one had a last, furious affair; fifty was the time for finesse, sixty had its compensations in the way of being a dowager and everyone rising when one entered the room—but thirty-two! *à bas!*

Before the call was over, Monroe had been given permission to orient Stanley into the Van Zile house. Young Mrs. Van had found a secondary aim in life. She estimated Tony Monroe as a gentlemanly cynic who accepted Dalefield with his tongue in his cheek. He admired Stanley as much as he was deceived by her. He was bored with his aristocratic wife, a self-righteous cat as nearly as Stanley could determine. He was as poor as he was artistic. Stanley was affluent—and thirty-two! The situation seemed ideal.

"We shall have much to say to each other," murmured Monroe as he bent to kiss her hand.

"Oh—please—" in the shy-girl fashion that in another thirty-two-year-old matron would have seemed a burlesque. Monroe's heart beat faster. The thought of his sallow-faced wife caused him to rejoice that Van Zile was more or less confined to his room. What a place he could create with the aid of Van Zile's money—velvety, mellowed spaces dotted with antiques—this golden-haired woman as the presiding genius. . . . Here he could come to rest and think—and believe. Best of all was the prospect of believing in someone.

Within the next twenty-four hours he told his wife

all that he deemed wise regarding this opportunity. Furnishing draperies for a local theater and advising as to wicker furniture in doctors' waiting-rooms did not constitute an opportunity in Monroe's estimation.

He must be at the Van Zile home a great deal, Mr. Van Zile was an affluent tyrant who adored his wife. His wife—well, Lucille should judge for herself.

Van Zile was informed as to the new order of events after Stanley had read the evening paper and brought him his favorite flowers, red carnations. The downstairs needed a little changing: a newcomer named Monroe was to try his hand at it. She did want a fountain in the reception hall, a rippling little affair that would laugh no matter what the weather . . . some nice, ugly idols on teakwood stands. Lacquer furniture was coming to be the mode. She wanted Oriental color and art to be introduced into the solid atmosphere of the downstairs—perhaps a jeweled Chinese tree . . . this could be her birthday and anniversary and Christmas presents all in one. Mr. Monroe seemed so in earnest, so devoted to his wife and baby daughter. Now she would leave her old precious to rest and reflect upon how generous he was going to be and what a lucky little goose she was. . . .

She tiptoed away, her lips still smarting from Van Zile's coarse kiss. She stopped at the nursery to find her son in a tantrum of the stiffening-and-lying-on-the-floor variety, his nurse, a tall, handsome bandannaed negress, at a loss how to proceed.

"Into a cold tub," ordered Stanley briefly, rather admiring Ames's ability to outwit Alice.

"A very cold tub," she added, noting that Ames halfway opened an eye.

His nurse protested. He was delicate, sometimes his ears ached and the water might——

“An extremely cold tub,” Stanley commanded.

Ames’s tightly pursed lips broke into an angelic smile. “Beautiful mummy,” he said as if he had just wakened from a happy dream. “Beautiful mummy——”

Stanley’s triumph precluded discipline.

“Naughty little man,” kneeling beside him. “Nice old Nana to stand up for you——”

Ames’s eyes searched her face. “Beautiful mummy,” he repeated as if that was the only idea that possessed him; it acted like a charm.

“Darling, whatever will I do with you? Still, you’ve tact——now, hasn’t he, Nana? And force, besides.”

“He done has MIGHT,” asserted the old negress.

“At heart he’s a lamb. It’s rare fun to think that there is someone new and wonderful. (‘And dependent,’ she was thinking.) Someone to whom you can show life and help select the things that he will do and call his own . . . lots more fun than picking out lacquer stands or squat little idols . . . hurry and grow up——mummy wants to play with you.” She picked him up in a tense embrace that made Ames’s eyes widen with surprise and the old negress turn away to conceal a laugh.

“Mis’ Van Zile——she done crazy about him,” was her report to the other servants. “Mis’ Van Zile, she’s gwine try to be God Almighty for Master Ames, but Master Ames, he’s gwine to find his own God Almighty . . . poor Mis’ Van Zile.”

CHAPTER XIII

IN 1905 the affair between Stanley and Tony Monroe had caused the latter's wife to return to the tarnished splendors of her Creole family. Then Lee Van Zile had the good taste to die. He was rewarded with a two-column obituary in a black box-border. Stanley and her son had knelt beside him in the approved fashion while he gasped something about his son's becoming a good man and taking care of his mother.

Tante, who took charge of the funeral because of Stanley's prostration, felt that at least Van Zile had not been cheated on his death-bed. Everything about his pompous lodge-represented funeral was exactly as he would have desired. Stanley had come slowly up the cathedral aisle leading Ames by the hand, thick veils covering her face and halfway sheathing her figure. Young Ames wore a crêpe band on his sleeve and his handsome little face was pale as he listened to the dirge.

After the will was probated and Mrs. Van Zile was left the bulk of the estate, Madame Grundy's vanguard began to speculate. Monroe would have his wife divorce him in order to marry the widow, as most certainly they ought to do. Or, perhaps, now having that most sacred of possessions—*independence*, and having taken from Monroe all that she had wished for—his ideas, his love, his marital happiness, and making him

an obedient servant, Stanley would seek new fields in which to find her solace.

With curious restraint Dalefield watched the trend of events. Van Zile had been spared any knowledge of the affair, nor could one criticize Mrs. Van Zile's correct mourning, the lowered shades of the mansion, the driving in a closed carriage but with an eye on the then appearing electric automobiles which crept noiselessly through the boulevards. Half its citizens claimed that Mrs. Van Zile had merely befriended an eccentric artist. She had been devoted to her husband and was unfairly misjudged, the fate of many beautiful widows. The other half asserted that the affair was insidious and deadly. It had driven Mrs. Monroe back to her father, it had deceived an old man and besmirched the boy's name by reason of Stanley's conduct. Only Stanley knew the truth, which she kept as completely to herself as Tante hugged a particular secret.

But Dalefield was unanimous in one conclusion: in going abroad, the red brick mansion boarded up as if for eternity, Mrs. Van Zile acted discreetly. As the time for Stanley's leavetaking drew near—she relented from the austere mourning to the extent of a cream-colored neck frill and a set of amethyst pins—Dalefield began to consider that Monroe was acting a bit queer; he was reported to have made extravagant statements and prophecies, to be drunk more often than sober, to neglect work and to write impossible letters to the Van Zile lawyers.

Again, only Stanley knew the truth. Tante had her opinion and the servants were loyal. Stanley protested that the thought of a second marriage was appalling; her great love had been Van Zile and her comfort in

the years to come was to be their son. When she erected a ten-thousand-dollar monument to Van Zile's memory, the papers gave her and it a laudatory editorial, and all Dalefield rushed to say good-bye.

A year after Stanley had gone abroad, Tony Monroe was committed to a state hospital in Louisiana. His wife, more sallow and suspicious than ever, gave music and embroidery lessons to pay for his extras only to be called "Stanley" whenever she visited him, to be asked the reason for the dark shadows in her hair—where was the sunshine hiding? Perhaps Lucille could have answered some of Dalefield's questions as she listened to her husband's ravings, now denouncing, now pleading, now praising, now exposing—but she kept silence, excepting to her saints.

The years slipped on and the mansion remained boarded up. Stanley's story became something to tell out-of-town visitors while driving by the old house.

. . . She was Millard Ames's only child . . . an actress . . . very beautiful. Her old husband worshiped her and this man Monroe was wild for her—and her fortune. She would not marry him—nobody's fool, after all. Went abroad and he to a state hospital; they say he fancies that she is coming back to him—well, nobody can say just how far—Her ex-butler, now proprietor of the highest-priced delicatessen shop in town, had said on good authority that Mrs. Van Zile had had Monroe shown out of her house not a week after Van Zile's funeral; the rage and disappointment turned his brain. There had always been an uncertain glint in his eye . . . yes, his wife came and took him away.

Occasional reports came back of Stanley's being on

the Continent or in Egypt, of Ames having finished a Swiss preparatory school and entered an English university. One January night the red house had the effrontery to burn down. Tramps had been in the stables and left a fire that crept obstinately through the walls. Dalefield enjoyed a night of thrills—with every fire engine in the vicinity pressed into service and the riff-raff of the community attempting loot. As the furnishings were tumbled out upon the snow, a life-size portrait of the late master and one of its present mistress lay in the moonlight, the glare of flames lighting up their faces. Stanley, young and beautiful, her yellow hair in a thick coil at the nape of her neck and her gown of pink floating from her shoulders like a veil; opposite her was Van Zile, red-nosed and smirking, his frock coat unable to conceal the fact that he was a commoner. As they lay there, the last wall of the mansion collapsed with a reverberating thud.

Within another year—the property was well insured—there rose upon the site a little red brick house with picturesque gables and mullioned windows, a high wall to prevent passers-by from knowing what might or might not be taking place in the garden. Half the plot had been sold but enough was reserved to make a miniature English garden. When the curious demanded to know the wherefore of this transformation, they were told that the little house was being completed prior to Mrs. Van Zile's return, her son to assume control of his father's estate.

To date the Van Zile interests were looked after by a capable young man, one Sam Russell, whose mother had been a second cousin of Van Zile's first wife! He was a graduate of a state university, a Rotarian, a

prize dancer, a fair hand at bridge, had a creditable golf score at the end of the season, saved a percentage of his earnings, longed to be socially supreme and drove a second-hand car with the consolation of knowing that at least it was paid for.

Discussion ran riot as to how young Van Zile would spend his fortune. Would the little jewel-box of a house, an accurate simile invented by its architect, be the scene of wild parties or the residence of a serious young man of affairs? There had been so many changes. Tony Monroe was dead. His wife stayed in the South, though Telva defied her relatives and drifted north to seek her fortunes. As for Blair . . . but no one remembered him excepting Stanley.

CHAPTER XIV

STANLEY never ceased rejoicing over the burning of the old mansion. Hers was a childish delight in this new playhouse with its huge, Elizabethan chimneys shooting themselves skyward—suggesting an ingénue masquerading in somebody's high hat.

She furnished the house in amusing chintzes and cretonnes, odd pieces picked up here and there—something of Moscow, a suggestion of Tangiers, a bit of Normandy, a colonial atmosphere in the dining-room with its cream hangings and butter-colored pine furniture. A great deal of Stanley's personality was in every room: her rosewood piano, her busy-looking little desk, her workbasket, her pet chair, her rose-draped room with the green tinted furnishings to match her eyes, her ragged terrier, Brainstorm, her cages of lovebirds, her postage stamps, her collection of semiprecious stones, even her clothes rack filled with soft, pastel-shaded frocks, and odd expensive wraps, nothing of Stanley's but what was at once beautiful and alluring. So Ames thought!

There had been more than one sharp loss to the fortune which Van Zile had willed to his wife. It was no one's fault other than that the investments shrank or failed to materialize as one had expected. The sausage factory had been sacrificed for a quick sale—Stanley having no desire that Ames continue to provide

breakfast titbits for his fellow countrymen. It was one of her principles to have a naïve ignorance of anything concerning business. But sometimes she wished that she had chosen another line of action, taken to tailored suits and glasses, managing the estate herself. She flattered herself that she might not have done badly. Whenever she worried about their income she mentioned it to Ames in a helpless, bewildered way so that mentally he pledged her every cent that was his. Ames's plans were visionary, any promoter could catch his ear. He saw everything on a large canvas, details were annoying. Because he did not choose to understand them, he underestimated their importance. He wanted to do spectacular things, to have a great deal of money but never to have to bother about making any more. He was in no way ashamed that his father had been a sausage manufacturer—it was an accepted thing, something to which he had given little time or consideration. He was merely content that he was not obliged to be one.

Even to Ames, Stanley had hedged about her financial losses. Only her broker, Sam Russell, who deplored her notion of letting Ames handle the money, realized the circumstances. The town still considered her its wealthiest widow and Ames the most eligible bachelor.

She spoke of her reverses to Ames with the pathetic humor that one accepts growing old. Not that she minded: a lace shawl, a few books, her dog and the piano, and she was content.

"But you have me, *mia*," Ames would insist. "More than ever and most of all—you have me."

"Which is my fortune," patting his cheek and cal-

culating to the last penny how much she would have to spend during the next three months.

When she was officially at home in this playhouse, her first caller was an original, untidy-looking girl whose shining black hair was piled into an old-fashioned topknot, flat jet pins thrust in dagger-wise and a great crimson shawl wrapped about her thin person.

The moment she had entered the living-room Stanley knew that that Roman nose, those piercing eyes, the high cheek-bones, could belong to no other than Tony Monroe's daughter—she was uncertain as to how to proceed. This poised young thing, who in the year 1922 had availed herself of every modern privilege, must have definite reasons for calling. So she urged her guest to sit near the fire with some commonplace upon the April chill.

"I'm Telva Monroe," announced the young person, thrusting a unique card into Stanley's hand.

It was shaped like a wine bottle. In the center in old English script was "Telva Monroe." A telephone number was in the lower lefthand corner.

Stanley read the card without the aid of her gold Oxford glasses. After which she drew a deep breath as if preparing for combat.

"My dear little girl," she said in her gentlest voice. "How sweet of you to come——"

"Hardly. I'm after you as a client," explained Telva; "mind if I smoke?" tapping a cigarette on her opened palm and displaying a heavy middle-finger ring of red gold resembling an expensive cigar band.

She threw back her shawl as she lighted the cigarette. This modern and unscrupulous young thing wore a brick-colored tweed made in amusingly man-

nish fashion. It was the sort of thing to harmonize with a boyish bob, yet Telva's heavy hair with its strange blue and steel tints lent dignity to a costume which otherwise would have suggested the grotesque.

Stanley noted the careless manner in which the frock was ripped here and there, the unmolested mud on her broad-soled walking shoes worn with flesh-colored chiffon stockings! About her neck were twined strings of bright beads, pendant earrings dangled as she talked. A large brooch of Java silver work was holding a mottled green crêpe-de-chine handkerchief on one of her sleeves—few young things would have the courage to appear in like costume.

"A client?" Stanley repeated, sparring for time and thankful that Ames was not about.

"A client! Shocked? So many are. I bank on you. I only know you through Sam Russell who is trying to marry me—while I favor having an affair. Sam lacks the nerve. He adores you, and thinks Ames is quite the cat's cuffs. He will try to be like him in his Hart, Schaffner and Marx manner—poor Sam, he ought to get his wife by mail order. If she had no pedigree at least she'd be registered."

The flush in Telva's sallow cheeks betrayed nervousness. Neither Stanley nor Telva was quite sure of herself.

"Sam's a nice lamb, and he does very well." Stanley pretended to add kindling to the fire. "But Ames will really go at the thing seriously, unless he finds that he has a flair for a profession." She fancied that she had spoken in a forbidding tone. Telva mentally tabbed it as "more blah from mother."

Aloud: "Sam's taken good care of things—a little

too conservative for a firebrand like me. We're dying to know if Ames will play with us; if you will let him," staring at Stanley with an imperturbable smile.

"Ames must make his own decisions—to date he has been rather fond of play. You forget that he is a man—"

"I do because I must realize that you are a genius," Telva gave a harsh laugh. "In this light you don't look a day over thirty. You've shingled your hair and here I am with great straggles of black—somehow I can't help thinking that it is more distinguished for some young things to be unbobbed. I hate bothering about mode, *per se*. I adore color, great, raw splotches of color, gobs and gobs of it. I love jewels, imitation ones if I can't afford the real. I'm a modernist even to despising my relatives. You've trained Ames to adore you—you've educated him abroad so that he has no roots in his own country; you've got it all your own way. I congratulate you—but I pity Ames." Coolly, she blew smoke rings and leaned back in her fireside chair, a refreshment brief-case resting insolently on her lap.

"My dear child," Stanley still needed to spar for time.

Telva decided not to mince matters. "You must remember that I was brought up to hate you—you're a household legend. If I'd been a boy I'd have been expected to make you pay for what you had done—poor mummy, she *has* suffered. But disliking my family, I'm inclined to like you—or at least be willing to talk it over. It's an interesting scandal—oh, come, don't try to blush—everyone in town has told me their version of it. Mummy was a praying shrew and father a fas-

cinating hound—I'm the natural result—a careless little mongrel." She flecked her cigarette until Stanley's prayer rug was defiled with the result.

"Everyone knew that you vamped father. Why squirm?" she added bluntly. "You're capable of hearing the truth even if your hair is ash-blonde and your son thinks that a word of scandal uttered in your presence might bring on a heart lesion . . . I salute you, madame—" In imagination Telva raised a wine glass and drained it. "But there is no use in not coming down to facts with me—that is if we're to respect each other. Not being a man, you can't win me with kiss-baby tactics. I'm neutral about what you did to my parents; as to father's mind going bad—sometimes I wonder about this thing called heredity." Telva's eyebrows were arched into abrupt peaks. "At any rate, mother gets quite a kick out of hating you—oh, God, what does it all matter anyway? What's life for a near-dowager unless she has a secret to gloat over?" Another dry little laugh.

"But don't go to New Orleans—the family still has considerable drag. . . . I'm keeping away myself. Now that I'm settled here I expect you to let me play with Ames. Whatever you and father did or neglected to do—a fig care I; yet I cared for him," she said with unexpected emphasis. "I loved him as I despised my mother . . . I must be reeking with a father complex."

"My dearest girl, you are letting your thoughts run wild. Was anyone ever subjected to quite such a torrent of impossible accusations? I despair of trying to explain." Stanley was alarmed. She felt the enemy's tocsin had sounded in this little house where she was

prepared to enjoy an undisputed middle age. Purposely, she had heard Telva's outburst in order to gauge her enemy.

"I'll agree not to go back into the dark ages," said Telva, after a moment's shrewd reflection. "Partly, because I came on business. I tried playing bridge but it was a dog's life. I made out fairly well with the Bar Harbor set but it cost too much for scenery—clothes, y'know, and all that. Competition was increasing; I've done very well although I'm damned and disinherited by the family—we had one *wow* of a row. Still, mother doesn't refuse my checks." Telva's full lips curling in scorn. "I only handle the best stuff, I'm unimpeachable as a matter of fact. If you find anything wrong I'll make it right. I've straight connections with Montreal and I get my stuff without delay. I never deal with the scum in the trade—any more than a chef bothers about who washes the dishes. You pay me more but you are spared any worry. Isn't it jollier to deal with someone who can talk drama or eat an artichoke intelligently? Rather conceited, but I'm useful, as you'll be bound to say before you've done with me. I'm the family friend as well as the bootleggerette."

"Oh, my child." Stanley rose in her amazement. She was thinking how much this disorderly, black-haired girl was like her father—his nerve and originality—and selfishness. . . . She began to wonder . . .

"But I am," reiterated Telva, opening her refreshment brief-case until some decanters and tiny glasses came to view. "Taste and see . . . I've stocked the cellars of the best houses in the township—I can give you exclusive references. If father was the best interior

decorator of his day, I'm the best interior exhilarator of mine."

"Is this all that you do?" demanded Stanley.

"I'm a mental patchwork quilt. Sometimes I go to church. I smoke and gamble but I can do fancy work and wash my silk undies and make cup custards as nicely as our grandmothers . . . it's all part of the age—this being a mental patchwork quilt. How about some apricot brandy? The real thing—and a few pints of Bordeaux? I've good champagne but it comes high—I get twelve a quart for Cliquot, and Pommery is scarce. As for whisky—the 1920 Seagram is as good a buy as I can recommend. I've a few bottles of vermouth and some Benedictine. One sip makes you feel lined with purple velvet . . . gin is plentiful but I haven't anything that I can recommend and the ale is pale stuff—I wouldn't urge it. If you can see your way to paying fifteen a quart I can give you some cognac. There's honest-to-goodness imported claret at four a bottle. . . . I've a little choice Tokay. I tell you this because this ducky room and your lace frock makes one think of old wine served in smart new glasses . . . too bad that no one is being christened to justify using it—for it's no less than '57! Yes, fifty-seven—and my compliments to *Godey's Lady's Book* and homemade currant wine. Ten a pint will take it. I'll make the six for fifty. A poor and virtuous widow of a poor and sinful scalawag wants to unload; she wants money for a gravemarker or something—I promised to help. Just my sort of charity—I'd like that Tokay to go to someone who——"

"You mean that you *sell* liquors, go about seeking orders, traffic with bootleggers and——" Stanley be-

came amused and forgot to be shocked. "What an idea! What a child you must be! Your father would have been proud even as he spanked you. But, Telva, I can't let you sell me anything and feel that you are having further success. I must report you, have you raided and then set you up in a nice tea room."

"Try it." Telva made a curious gesture with her right hand; it resulted in a poked hump in her shawl. "Yes, an automatic gun," she admitted. "I believe in having something in reserve; part of the trade, as a nail file is a manicure's. What loves of primroses—you have luck with flowers, I dare say. Mother says you knew how to do the wrong thing at the right moment; my motto is to do the right thing at the wrong moment."

"Where do you live, you wicked and interesting bit of impudence?" Stanley had not yet decided what course to adopt.

"I'm a hotel fiend. . . . Where I keep my supplies is another matter. I loathe homes from palaces to bungalows; yards with slugs and bird droppings and clothes poles make my flesh creep. My kingdom is a courtyard room and bath of a disreputable hotel which used to be swank—The Lenox."

"The Lenox," Stanley repeated. "Why I went there as a tiny thing—after my mother died—why, Telva." Her voice softened without any conscious effort.

"Um . . . we have burlesque companies and fourth-rate drummers, fifth-rate crooks and sixth-rate ladies—and me . . . and some nice old parties of both sexes with annuities and crooked wigs and pearly teeth. Me and these old timers keep the place out of the clutches of the law. We are still received. The food is

tolerable and the plumbing intolerable, but there's always hot water if you don't mind its rusty color and the noise in the pipes. The towels are slate-gray and torn but ironed very shiny and flat. I prefer them to Italian linens. Electric lights replace the sun and the carpet is liny and strewn with pins and cigarette ashes. I can hide my love-letters in the copy of the Gideon's Bible. No one minds if I mar the near-mahogany when I set down glasses or hot curling irons. I've a grand brass bed with slimpsey sheets and one great and glorious violet satin quilt that I bought myself. That transforms me into a princess. I can burrow in it and hide. I envy no one when I turn on my steam heat full force and have my cigarette and a cordial and then snuggle in my violet satin quilt and map out tomorrow's work. Next to hotels I choose delicatessen shops and uncensored movies, lipsticks of weird shades and cloying perfumes, monogrammed cigarettes and ugly pet dogs, elevators that squeak and hotel clerks that always know the horse that ought to have won, music while you eat if it's no more than a drum and fife. I'm a fan for midnight bathing parties and dingy taxis and bargain matinées and silk underwear. All of my friends carry something on the hip besides a birthmark . . . now then, what may I book you for?" producing a memorandum pad and a fountain pen.

"Telva," Stanley felt that she must seize her opportunity, "I am glad you are frank. Naturally I have wondered about Tony's daughter, how she was growing up and what she was going to do. I believe that you can understand the—er—friendship which your father and I enjoyed. I tried so hard to make Lucille under-

stand," pausing in an appealing way. "But Lucille's day and my day has ended," still ignoring the fountain pen poised in midair. "This is your day—and Ames's. I want to see you make the most of it. You are near to me because of your father. The world misunderstood him; it will misunderstand you. When I listen to you, it seems as if Tony is talking to me, rebelling, ridiculing—but you are Telva, not Tony, aren't you? Young and wilful and clever—so is Ames. You must know each other."

"Afraid I'll shock him? Sam says I will. Want me to forego my bread-and-caviare in order not to shock your Ames? Wish I could—but I've too excellent a trade. Besides, Ames drinks." (Stanley's hurt look impressed Telva in spite of herself.) "Already he is noted for the decent way he does it. If you don't give me your order, Ames will."

"We have had such golden years together. I would not trade one for a king's ransom. Now Ames must live his own life—well, what could be easier?"

Telva decided that Stanley was supreme in her own line. For the first time she pitied her mother.

"If you must do this illegal, delightful thing," continued Stanley, "and if Ames *will* drink—although he takes care that I know little about it, I'll take the rare Tokay and the Bordeaux and some champagne——"

"I'll deliver it in Sam's jitney all done up in smart hat boxes with metal linings—and what is more, I'll come and help drink it up," promised Telva.

"Do," said Stanley with a sudden sharpness of tone that made Telva lower her cool white lids over her smouldering eyes and decide not to give Ames's mother the lowest rate for the Bordeaux after all!

CHAPTER XV

A FEW days later Ames returned from the West Indies where he had been cruising with an English chum. It had been a tame-cat trip as Stanley well knew, one which freed him from the bothersome details of settling the new house. Like most brilliant and self-indulged persons Ames was unashamedly selfish excepting where his mother was concerned. Having been her doormat, he, in turn, demanded that the world be his. So far the world had complied, being either fascinated or so well paid that refusal would have been a poor stroke of business. Ames disliked domestic upheavals; it was better that he drift through the aquamarine waters of the Caribbean seas and write appreciative letters illustrated with cartoons of the passengers.

Being far from a weakling, Stanley's treatment of her son resulted in his becoming a dual personality, a chivalrous, old-fashioned, rather reserved man in his home, apparently holding no ideas save those which his mother approved. At his club and about town he was a wit and a gamester, a periodically heavy drinker, rather diffident to women, while in business he lacked concentration and continuity. Ames could drink and make love like a gentleman. In a dispute his fine, square-jawed face would turn an intense white while his blue eyes looked steadfastly at his opponent until

the latter wished that he had not started the controversy no matter what the justification.

"Ames should have been an actor," it had often been said.

"What does it matter what he is—he's a millionaire," would be the retort.

If Ames's temper, high spirits and extravagant tastes somewhat warranted the retort, he was to Stanley's mind a man-god whom the world must worship partly because he worshiped her. Her "affair" with Ames was such a satisfactory thing—with no unpleasant crises nor disturbing outside factors. He was made to feel as dependent upon her as he was responsible for her.

He came back from the West Indies with an impudent monkey, an armful of shawls, some guava jelly and a panama hat. He was to settle down in Dalefield if he could stick it, as his college chum had suggested. What was there in Dalefield? Just what was it he was to do?

Ames felt handicapped by being described as "good-looking." Physical charm plus his father's fortune plus his mother's efficient tyranny equaled personal bankruptcy! That he was tall and muscular with clear, blue eyes and dark, wavy hair, that he had an inborn instinct for the niceties of existence which included being well-groomed, was somewhat disconcerting. He told himself that he was the country-club type of villain described in novels, eventually put in the discard by some uncouth, monkey-faced hero whose fairy godmother wisely withheld the gift of personal beauty.

"You've done wonders, *mia*," he said the first evening they were alone in the new house. "But you always

do that, don't you?" looking up from the fire and pulling the monkey's chain to rouse him from his nap.

Stanley smiled. (She planned on an early demise for the quizzical little beast.) "You think so but it's not a universal opinion. This house is just the place for me to grow old in. I don't mind the prospect . . ." She leaned back on her chaise longue and let the effect of her printed chiffon frock—like autumn leaves—sink in. She was knitting Ames a golf sweater, her small fingers flying in and out with the needles through the skeins of purple wool. With her shingled hair and the glow from the reading-lamp she seemed so young that one enjoyed her confessions about growing old.

"You are the youngest thing in the world." Ames let his book slip to the floor. "I wonder that someone doesn't come along and elope with you. I shouldn't blame him."

"It is not I who will be eloping," the suggestion of reproach in her voice. "I'm prepared for the worst! Only it will be hard to give you up. We've been together so much that the only real thing in life is you——" working with extra speed at the knitting.

Ames came to sit on the edge of the chaise longue. "*Mia*, I never intend to marry unless you are perfectly content—that is a solemn promise. I've never been in love," with a sadness in his voice as if he inwardly knew that he had best not experience it. The truth which he continually evaded was that he was not free. Neither the Van Zile estate nor Dalefield restrained him, but this yellow-haired little jailoress who had built the jewel-box of a prison and who saw to his every comfort. He ought to be ashamed of even the shadow of rebellion . . . but he was not free.

"When the right person happens by, you'll not wait to ask for my consent," said Stanley bending over her work. "Ames dear, aren't you going it a bit fast? Wasn't it two when you came in this morning? Oh, I know it was celebration and welcome home—and very nice to be put up for your father's club—but—"

"Uh . . . silly party and a beastly head. Father never drank too much, did he?" Ames was glad to change the subject. He picked up the monkey and pretended that he was going to tangle him in the yarn.

"No—only sherry in eggnogs." Her grim little *moue* caused him to chuckle.

"I must have developed the talent all by myself. Weren't you awfully bored in the house and with—just eggnogs?" His eager, tanned hand reached over to her busy fingers.

"Terribly. But I had you and your future to plan for. That was enough."

Ames frowned. "But you must have cared for someone else—sometime. It seems a fate no one entirely escapes. Was the someone else impossible?" He was thinking of Van Zile's portrait—those stub-pen features, those hard little eyes.

"Why talk of what might have been? I've you and your future still—some day, your children." Her voice was like a gently strummed harpstring.

Ames stared into the fire. "By the way, *mia*, I met a newspaperman last night—an interesting derelict from New York who has landed a job at the *Press*. He intrigued me—that's the only word for it. He hated me offhand. I'm not used to being hated," he said frankly, sitting up straight and looking at his handsome young self in the pier glass opposite. "I seldom antagonize

people—and I resent anyone who tries spoofing. No one has ever made fun of me to my face before. I thought Dalefield might be monotonous but if last night is a sample——” trailing into silence as if uncertain how much to admit.

“Sounds amusing,” said Stanley unconcernedly. “Who in the world made fun of you?”

The Japanese houseman—it had pleased Ames to have him—announced that a Miss Monroe was waiting outside; Mr. Russell was with her. His apologetic cough indicated that something else was waiting, too.

Stanley frowned. “Telva Monroe is an old friend’s daughter. She knows our Sam Russell—and everyone else in town. I warn you that she is shocking. This young girl of excellent family and upbringing is actually——”

Ames chuckled. “Yes, she supplies the club. A dynamic kid. I’ve met her. Sam’s smashed on her, he’s such a square-headed, square-hearted old top that he couldn’t help falling for Telva who is anything but square—show ‘em in, Bensota.”

“Who made fun of you?” insisted Stanley. She had become alarmed for some unaccountable reason.

“Oh, I’ll settle with him yet; his name is Blair Britton. The beggar said he knew you years ago when you were on the stage. Hullo, there, Telva; hullo, Sam—why, you look like Santa Claus.”

“We taste better than anything he ever brought in his pack—heave-ho!—right here. Run out for the rest, Sam. No, don’t let the Jap go—I never trust servants. My dear Mrs. Van, are you still shocked? Wasn’t Ames to know?” with a glance of mock penitence directed towards Ames. “Using Sam’s boat is

such a victory I couldn't help showing off. Sam has relatives in Uncle Sam's prohibition department; Sam thinks that dandelion wine and three percent beer wouldn't ruin our civilization but anything more—ugh," wriggling her fingers expressively as she balanced on Stanley's chair arm and watched Sam, red-faced and disapproving, tug in a case of champagne and deposit it with a thud.

"I feel guilty in letting you do this," Stanley objected. "You see, Ames, the child does not comprehend——"

"Ah, but the brat does. She is a low, knowing thing." Telva inhaled a cigarette. "She does the right thing at the wrong moment. I'm going to leave you some cards. You will meet the quiet pussycats whom I want to furnish with liquid catnip. I'm cutting out the club, Ames—they want cheap stuff. They don't care if their absinthe comes from Yonkers. I'm letting Cooky the Dude take the club trade. He gave me a hundred for the transfer. I'll be terribly poor unless someone helps me with new clients." She laid a pile of her cards on Stanley's lap.

"Telva—don't you think that you could——"

"No," said Telva, drawing her fringed shawl about her to conceal a ragged jersey frock of an absurd green shade. "I don't want to be a nursery governess or sell *What Children Don't Want to Know* books! No one has ever offered me a half interest in a gold mine. It's tough sledding in these days of affluent and lonesome commercial nuns! As for marriage——" flecking her cigarette as if indicative of the state of contempt with which she regarded it.

Sam Russell, who was but five feet two and almost

as broad, his red hair in a sleek, shining pompadour, stared pitifully at Telva. He was annoyed at his liking for her just as he was amusingly jealous of Ames's appearance and the silver spoon with which he had been born. Everything Sam Russell had, Sam Russell earned—and kept, he comforted himself. He was moral, he was ambitious, he played the violin fairly well and had a trained police dog. Yet he was regarded as a nobody in Dalefield's social life. His brokerage and investing business was reliable, the Van Zile estate being his biggest asset, but it had not admitted Sam to the inner circle. People had not yet forgotten that his father kept a tobacco and news stand and that his mother had been a seamstress and related to Van Zile's first wife. Sam had gone to night school and borrowed money to go through a third rate college with a year's training for financial work. He felt that he deserved the best the town offered and wondered why everyone was not convinced that this was so. He was distressed at finding himself attracted to this black-haired, untidy, thoroughly unconventional Telva Monroe, being drawn into helping her deliver illicit goods. "Oh, God, do you see this?" was Sam's mental attitude after the manner of Laertes. Yet he was at her beck and call, torn between the thought of detection and the prospect of renunciation!

Ames shook his head as if to indicate that he preferred Telva should deliver her monologues at some other time. They unpacked the liquors and put them under lock and key while Telva produced a bottle of sparkling Burgundy which she insisted upon their sampling.

Another half-hour of banter and she kissed Stanley

good night in an audacious way, whispering something about her wanting to steal Ames for the rest of the evening. She would wait for him at the Flowing Bowl Club—he might be passing by later. Sam lived by schedule and prided himself on his bedtime just as he did on his being at the office two minutes before any of his staff and removing his hat when in an elevator no matter if scrubwomen were the only other passengers. . . . Sam would not linger at the Flowing Bowl Club—poor old Sammie, she ended, tilting her black head impudently. He did so love chocolate ice cream and *Barrack-Room Ballads!*

"What do you think of her?" asked Ames abruptly as he came back from seeing them off.

"She makes me feel impossible—but in the right," admitted Stanley, resuming her knitting. "As for that man—not Sam—but Mr. Britton—Blair——"

"You are right but never impossible. Telva is a terror and no mistake. She shouts family secrets as one broadcasts election returns. No barriers, no pride, no principles—but she gets away with it. They all seem to these days—a funny line, isn't it? This girl deals with cutthroats and gangsters, bringing contraband stuff into the best or the worst houses, whichever pays her the price, and boasting of it, yet she pours at drama league teas and attends the current topics course. *Mia*, I'm out of tune with the present crowd. Is it all me or all them—or both?"

"That is a question most of us ask without hoping to receive an answer. Has this man Britton come to stay?"

"Think so; he's an attractive renegade who has ruined his own life and is bent on making a hash of the

other fellow's. I sensed that he disliked me before he asked about you. I wanted to punch him square between the eyes—and then ask him out for a drink."

"He was a friend of mine because he was engaged to a girl I knew." Stanley's voice was clear and well modulated, as if she had had the speech so well rehearsed that she had lost any emotion concerning its meaning. "Donna Lovell was an actress who has been dead for over twenty years. For some strange reason he became infatuated with me. I was a frightened little creature come to New York because there had been nowhere else to go. When I would have nothing to do with Blair, he pretended that he was very much cut up and had broken his engagement with Donna for my sake. He left the stage and became a newspaper-man, drinking heavily all the while. I'm surprised he still is in the running."

"He mentioned that he was an actor," said Ames.

"A fair one," with great magnanimity. "But conceited and bombastic—women of a certain type raved about him. Poor Donna was tricked by him. It was kinder that she died."

"Your father came along and married me. I've hardly given it another thought," with a careless laugh. "Don't see this man often; never trust him. He is not your sort." Rising, she folded her knitting and waited for Ames to offer his arm. She went upstairs with a charming pretense of feebleness. Ames told himself that his mother was right—her life was lived, she was a blessed, faded little person to be protected and cared for always. This bitter-tongued, wild-eyed man with a twisted mouth that might once have been a natural smile had dared to love her. Had he known that, he

would have challenged Britton after his first insinuating remark.

Ames went downstairs to drive to the Flowing Bowl where he found Telva and her band waiting for some intrepid and well-financed spirit to start action. Ames was in the mood to obey; he craved excitement, stimulation: he was always somewhat tense after an intimate conversation with his mother.

Stanley had heard the front door close. She sat up in bed, thinking what was best to do. Blair in Dalefield . . . insulting and ridiculing Ames . . . the old grudge must still fester. She must never let Ames know . . . must not let Blair feel in authority . . . she wanted to see him . . . rather provoking to find that she was keen for an encounter. She battled with this desire and the conditions which might arise between Ames and Blair. Telva must be considered, too, this dangerous, electrical young woman with her bootlegging and cigarettes and wild philosophy of life. Then there was tortoise-like Sam Russell who would stupidly beat them all! She would visit Tante in the nursing home on the pretext of taking her a bed-jacket. She now turned to her as one turns to the church after straying into the bypaths of cults and materialistic freethinking. There would be a relief in telling Tante. Tante was *real*—with her grim, gray face, her wisps of hair strained into an ugly button at the back of her neck, the flannel wrapper making her twice as unattractive. Sometimes Stanley believed that she was a trifle in awe of Tante—as a fox slinks not so much at the hounds as at the master of the hounds. Tante had told the truth when she condemned her for having loved her canary to death. . . .

CHAPTER XVI

TANTE was cantankerous, due to the pain in her knee. She was a source of amusement to the fresh-faced young nurses who listened to her abrupt comments upon the events of the day. She occupied a tower room on the top floor of the hospital and sat in a wheel-chair as one would occupy a throne, her cane trapping imperiously for attention.

"This Blair was a good enough youth," she insisted when Stanley had told her troubles. "And Monroe was a bad man. You knew both as only a pretty woman knows the men who love her," looking with admiring disapproval at Stanley's attractive self in the gray corduroy tailleur and daring red turban. "Be glad that Ames is not too much like yourself." A whimsical smile lit her face.

"Because I was once engaged to him, must he be hateful to my boy?"

"Do Ames good; needs someone to check him up. You're too sweet and overscented like these very hyacinths. Bah," with a tap of her cane, "let Ames know him—be insulted—they'll get to be friends," suppressing a chuckle as if no one else was to understand the joke.

"There's Telva, too." Stanley's face was a study in distress. "It is absurd for her to be my bootleggerette. She's an amazing personality but so unsound, so daring. She is certain to be attracted to Ames."

"Good for Ames, he's no milk-and-water fop. Let him be ruined by someone other than yourself. In knowing Blair and Telva, he may come to know you," she warned.

"When I was a girl," said Stanley pensively, "we never dreamed that a gentlewoman could ever——"

"Your sort of deceit was different. These youngsters are up and out with it; the worst at the first crack. I like it. They really want to be good but they're naturally curious as to sin. You pretended that you thought your elders knew everything; they brag that their elders know nothing—both are wrong. You simpered and sang and flirted; she bootlegs and smokes and gambles—you'd both play the same hard game of 'me first' if anything worth while was at stake. Let Ames know 'em all." Tante's teeth showed in a triumphant grin.

"Oh, Tante, I miss Lee more all the time." Stanley took refuge in her widowhood and a lace handkerchief. "Perhaps I never appreciated him. I never had to grow up, for I was his precious child just as I was papa's. . . . Ames makes me feel old but brittle, and awfully unequal to the occasion."

"Good for Ames," applauded Tante.

Stanley did not seem to have heard: "Lee was my one love, as you must know. Now that I've come back to this little place with all its memories, must I——"

"Must unwelcome ghosts begin to walk? Is that it?" questioned Tante. "Stanley, you were the same at seven as you will be at seventy. Your father, Blair, Van Zile, Monroe, even Ames, have not had the brains to find out that much about you."

"You're a terrible old woman," protested Stanley.

"I come to you as I would have come to my mother, and you say hateful untruths . . . mentally, you may not be quite the thing these days——"

"A threat—eh?" the ragged eyebrows raised into amused, ironical peaks.

"Never threats to you—just appeals. Tell me——"

"Do I think that you'll be found out? If you live long enough to know your grandchildren. You may trick two generations, but the third is sure to trip you up. Meanwhile, let Ames see Blair—make him welcome at the house—it'll prove wiser in the end."

Stanley left the nursing home with the composite feeling of a patroness and a penitent. She stopped at the *Press* editorial offices and left her card with a line scribbled on it asking Blair to call. Then she drove to the old Lenox Hotel. Stifling sentiment, she invited Telva to dinner.

She drove to Sam Russell's offices to discover that her son had not been there that day. Sam admitted this with something of triumph. He believed that Ames was going to lunch at The Tavern with a newspaperman.

When Blair's card was brought up to Stanley the following evening, she felt that things augured well. He had come at once, and Ames was at the theater. She had decided to be one of the "mes" that Blair had never seen—a brusque, unpowdered, uncoiffured me wearing a second rate gown.

As she started downstairs she found herself hesitating. The temptation was too great. She hurried back to slip into an apple-green velvet embroidered with seed pearls, fluffing her hair into half a halo, half a mop of unruly curls.

Entering the drawing-room she paused, wondering if Blair's heart was beating as fast as hers. He seemed so old—so lack-luster. Could this be the same ardent man who had believed her faintest fib and hung upon her slightest smile? He was shabby and redolent of gin, his necktie was a stringy affair, his hands shaky and the knuckles swollen. Had she done this to him, she wondered in a passing flash of remorse?

"Why, Blair," she began, stretching out her arms as if he were a neglected child.

"Still Stanley—and at her best," Blair declaimed harshly, remaining at arm's length.

"The boy is not like you," he added, as if that was something of a triumph.

"Blair," she repeated, still holding out her arms. "You funny, neglected tramp—tell me everything just as you used to do." She had taken possession of a black velvet William and Mary lounge and beckoned invitingly. The years began slipping away; there was nothing to be so alarmed and melodramatic about—Blair was merely Blair, she was always herself. He was fortunate at being received into her home. She must make that clear before she had finished.

"He's a fine lad," said Blair unexpectedly, "only you have ruined him." His faded eyes stared at her in accusation.

"It has been so many years and I've lived through so much—as you have," she faltered.

He came closer and bent down, scrutinizing her as if for some blemish. "But you have not changed—you will never change, will you?"

She drew a sigh of relief as he pronounced the verdict.

"No, thanks," in answer to her second invitation to be seated. "Well—where do you want me to begin? I'm a three bottle man! Even rescue missions have despaired of me . . . yes, I've slipped that far. I have beastly poor eyes and something the matter with my heart that makes me numb when I least expect it. Once, I played five sets of tennis a day! Donna died and I don't know what's become of anyone at Mary Dealey's—she's been gone these last ten years, bless her! The paper changed hands and I found myself crowded out. I floated north stopping here and there for a week. I found that I could stay here and get enough money to pay for my smokes and half of my drinks. I can stall the other half. I've insomnia and rotten digestion and fallen arches, and what does it matter? Your boy is a splendid cad. A few jolts and he might be cured. He adores you, too," he added grudgingly. "That was to be expected . . . Got any brandy—a glass of ale—wine, perhaps? You see, I've no pride . . . I need to drink if I'm to play the gentleman," his faded, handsome head sagged to one side.

Stanley brought champagne and sandwiches. She had estimated how long before Ames would return. Presently Blair told Stanley fragments of the rest of his story.

"Yes, Donna died," he said piteously. "I went back to Donna after I smashed—perhaps she was not wise as you were. You came upstate and married Van Zile and had a son—did the boy say that I insulted him? All hail to my enemy!" drinking an imaginary toast.

"Do you hate me?" asked Stanley somewhat timidly.

"What would be the use? I'd rather hate Ames—

but I'm afraid that I can't. Donna told me to forget you. . . . Donna! Oh, God, if you knew all of it! The best I can say is that I'm prepared to pity you. Just now you're supreme, but age is creeping up like the tide. You'll be caught in it before you're aware. You'll have to go chasing climate and have platinum bridge work and someone to read aloud, but you'll still be Stanley. . . . I wonder why I came here," he asked himself.

"Then you are not my friend?" She was timid, wistful.

He shook his head. "I am not even my own friend."

"Poor, bitter Blair—is it only money that you need?"

His crooked smile made her ashamed. "The more money I have the drunker I get. The less I have the sharper my remorse—oh, it has nothing to do with you. Let me see the boy now and then. I'm coaxing him to try reporting; it will break him in to American ways and thought, he's as stiff and impractical as a new press."

"I may buy the paper," Stanley threatened. "My son would be its editor."

"Do—and pension me," laughed Blair. "Are you that much afraid of me? Come, I've acted decently—no come-back, not even a scene. You hardly expected such good behavior?" His lower jaw took on such a stubborn twist that Stanley wished for Ames.

"Why stay here?" she said quietly.

"Because I'm tired floating and drifting. Because I've a job I can handle—thirty-five dollars a week; magnificent, is it not? Once Broadway thought that

I——" He stopped to gulp the last of his champagne. "To Donna Lovell," he sang out, draining the glass.

Stanley got rid of him before midnight. By then he was maudlin, his thickly worded speeches no longer disturbed her. But the fear that he might revolutionize Ames's life remained. She was glad that she had asked Telva for dinner. Telva could become an important ally. Telva was young and of Creole blood, her poverty was a pleasing feature in Stanley's eyes. In proper evening dress she might be an inspiration.

* * * * *

"You must not always judge a man's soul by his actions," Ames told his mother six months later. "If Blair is a libertine to outward appearances he is a priest of a high altar within. Sorry to disagree but I do like him," poking away at the fire of birch logs which warmed the October air.

It was after a midday breakfast, their time for plans and promises. Unless Stanley was ill or Ames had been out too late they ate together, withdrawing to the den afterwards to plan the rest of their campaign.

She was knitting something as cloudy and fleecy as her blue gown. With many other things, Ames unconsciously associated his mother with exquisite clothes. He had never seen her carelessly or unbecomingly gowned.

But he dreaded this debate as he did all their debates upon the subject of Blair. For six months Stanley had purred her disapproval, trying every gentle appealing gesture to counteract this new influence. For six months Ames had found himself at war with the world. Heretofore he had warred only with himself in a

vague, unsatisfactory fashion—his mental battle ending in sentimental surrender. His mother did not want him to do so and so, she did not like or trust this new friend, that topcoat was unbecoming, the last model car was ugly, he must sell the hound dogs ever since they had attacked tradesmen. But this new state of affairs was different.

Something crucial as well as exhilarating was being expressed in his revolution with the cosmos, in having left Sam Russell and the Van Zile estate and going on the *Press* as a general reporter, his mother standing aghast at what seemed a calamity.

That Blair was responsible for it, Ames seemed rather proud. "He wants me to knock about," he had explained. "Says I've seen the seven wonders of the world only from my mother's arms, so to speak, and that I can get down to reality in Dalefield far better than at Oxford or doing the Tyrol. He's been in so many tight places himself and come out somehow that I respect his opinion—it's not altogether Blair's fault that he's down in the world."

"So you are going to leave your father's affairs and me for a vagrant stranger's advice. Is it that you do not realize that I've waited years for this time, to be able to relax my vigilance, be assured that our interests were properly guarded? Oh, Ames, think twice." And she cried her prettiest, a watchful green eye noting his indecision.

They had compromised by Ames's intention of trying out the newspaper game for a year and then deciding whether he would take the Van Zile estate—or what was left of it—seriously or whether it was to be a bona fide profession. Stanley's first impulse had

been to buy the *Press* and discharge Blair but she was afraid that Ames would have fought for him. That would have been too dangerous a matter.

She was forced to watch him go into the city-room at a joke of a salary, growing closer to Blair as he grew away from her. They quarreled and hiked and drank and gambled together—this wise derelict and this uncertain youngster. When Stanley hurried to fill her house with the younger set as an antidote to Blair's propaganda, Ames fought away from being present. He was out of step with his own generation, his own countrymen, he was growing into step with this brilliant wreck who sometimes loved him, sometimes distrusted him—sometimes understood him so perfectly. When Blair was in a black, insulting mood Ames had learned to stay away. When Blair was taciturn—and broke—Ames was as silent and tender as when he sat with his mother during a heart attack. When Blair was riotous in spirits, pugnacious—"out on the shout" as he called it, Ames's spirits responded and they went forth to claim the world as their playground and any they might meet as playmates, to do the things which men have always done—and warn their sons against with middle-aged mock-wisdom. Occasionally Blair was serious—and they would sit in his hall bedroom to talk and smoke, eat cheese and drink ale. Sometimes he would bring out his unpublished short stories and ask for Ames's reactions.

Very seldom Blair fell into a mood that not even Ames could penetrate—he would be thinking of Donna, perhaps, or of Stanley, worse luck. He was dangerous when he was like this, it usually preluded a drinking bout during which time no one came near him

and someone else did his work at the office, reporting him out on sick leave. At the end of this brain cataclysm he would reappear with a hangdog look, slouching into the city-room to greet Ames with a snarling: "Not fired yet? How's the lady-mother?"

Yet between them was the camaraderie which exists only between men—one of which has a secret and the other a respect for it. Occasionally he came to Stanley's house, Stanley attempting to put him ill at ease and Ames rescuing him with prompt loyalty.

Sometimes Telva Monroe coaxed a dinner invitation from Blair or when he had theater passes she invited herself in exchange for a pint of brandy. He disliked Telva Monroe because he understood her. Ames did not. He was timid of understanding Telva because he realized that his mother was wishing for him to fall in love. He did not understand why this should be—although he had tried, at intervals, to accept his mother's estimate of this determined, greedy young woman with her perilous occupation and her startling standards of living.

"You'll marry her, God help you," Blair had said the evening before Ames was to tell his mother of a new decision. "She'll stop bootlegging and go to bottle-licking! Oh, but she will: she's out to climb. She'll not prattle about her hotel's almost being raided. She'll wear tons of jewels and have a pair of chows. She'll domineer Stanley; I doubt if even that famous person will be a match for her. Your remarks will fall as static upon her ears. She'll have a lover but no family—that's Telva!"

In contrast to this blunt denunciation Ames kept hearing Stanley's gentle voice: "Telva's a dear; blood

does tell. The blood of kings is in her family! I admit she is shocking and barbaric but she's quite all right underneath that veneer, and she adores you. Everyone sees it . . . she is hungry for love, for someone who really cares. We all need that," with a little sigh. "Her mother was a neurotic who could not recognize genius in the attic stage. Her father was hungry for someone to love and understand. . . . I might have . . . but I must not live in the past. Only I can't bear to see his child misunderstood—grow shopworn through no fault of her own. I'm trying to do for her what he would have done for my son. . . . Please see more of Telva, she does you good. Don't take her remarks seriously. Don't you think she's distinctive?"

"Blair says that Telva is like raw beefsteak," Ames had answered. "Not being a cannibal she's a trifle too lurid for me."

This October morning, the tang in the air suggestive of that last week in the woods before the November rains, Ames moved restlessly in his chair.

"*Mia*," he began, "I'm sorry you won't agree that Blair is a battered but wonderful old man."

"He's not so old," Stanley corrected automatically. "Don't put him in the Tante class. . . . What I can't become reconciled to is your being a mere reporter. With your equipment and opportunities a dozen business firms would have started you in at far more. You were on the verge of reading law when you came back from the West Indies. It is due to this one pernicious influence——"

"I've let everyone influence me," he broke out suddenly. "Precious as you are—you have moulded me.

In the university I was an American, never one of the real crowd; I was younger than most and had more money, Yankee sausage money, they called it—I've never told you. I was lonesome during those four years when I ought to have been the happiest—I was known as the chap with a mother. I've never told you that, either. Every moment I could snatch was spent in the London flat or in Paris or at Torquay—never with boys my own age—only one or two that happened to be thrown my way in lodgings and trains and so on. . . . College didn't do for me what it is meant to do—I made no effort—I was a stranger without roots, so why grow? What I needed was to work my way through an American university——”

“And have me in London! You mean that you felt tied to your mother's apron strings? Oh, Ames, have I blundered?” She held out her hands in appeal.

“Not blundered—things have been difficult for both.” He found the explanation as awkward as had been the situation. “If I ever have a boy I'll educate him in his own country—and on pretty short rations. He can't slide along without being razzed, but he'll come out feeling one of a great unit—he'll have friends, he'll know his own day and age. You and I, *mia*, have always been individuals who were harmonious but we have never been a family. Therein is another telling difference.”

“You will marry and have a family,” she urged.

“I hope so,” but there was no enthusiasm in his voice. “Lately, I've come to see how out of whack I am, in one sense; how I've been an easy mark for anyone who flattered me . . . yes, but I have been. I've dissipated instead of worked—I've drifted instead of

taken root—my only purpose has been to be your son!" There, he felt better now that it was said.

"He told you this!" accused Stanley.

"No, he hinted at it. I did the rest. I tell you, *mia*, he's a priest at times. He's making me grow—"

"Warped, cynical, dissipated. Do you think that I don't know how late you stumble in these nights?" Stanley's eyes were tear-blurred.

Ames winced. "Sorry. I suppose I'm rather a torment. Don't worry—it's partly my newspaper hours. But I won't ever go the way of drink if that is what is worrying."

"Are you so sure? Dearest, you ought to marry, settle down. I won't give you up but I'll share." She put her arms about his neck with a gesture indicative that she had no intention of sharing but merely binding him closer. "Tell me this: if Telva were not quite so—radical—would you like her?"

"Very much, but not that way," was the instant reply.

"She likes you—that way."

"I don't believe it. She's going to like a lot of us—oh, she has said so—she likes Sam and even Blair and some of the rum-runners—one grubby French Canadian quite thrills her. Telva can be easily consoled."

"If you would take her seriously—"

"Why should I? Telva doesn't take marriage seriously."

"Ah, she does—all women do. We know that we have to! Besides, you've shown her attentions—I believe she hopes." Stanley's voice was tense.

Ames glanced at the clock and frowned. He was eager to be out and away. He must tell his mother

of a trip he intended taking; he was to start that night. Matters seemed confused; was he always to be fought with that unfair weapon—tears?

"You don't really want me to marry Telva Monroe?" he persisted.

"I would be happy if you wanted to marry her. Poor Telva—had her father lived, things would be so different. *I know.*"

"*Mia*, did you love him? What of his wife?"

"I was just a dream of his: he was my suppressed but beautiful hope. There, the secret's out! He is dead and I am left—and it is Telva of whom I am thinking—little, foolish Telva no matter what her bravado . . . she needs someone like you—she could care very hard."

Ames began fidgeting with ornaments on a console table. "She seems sufficiently settled from all I have ever noted," he said brusquely. "Please drop that notion. I promise I'll do my best to understand her—and myself. For now I've another job on hand. I'm off to the north woods of Canada on a curious errand. An Associated Press dispatch came in telling of a Russian princess, no less than one Valja Anzia Zanowitz, who is starving in her wilderness home; an eccentric character who escaped the Soviets and drifted over here, a cousin of the Czarina's and all the rest of it. Her creditors are pressing her hard; it seems she has some art treasures in this farmhouse where she has taken sanctuary but she has no intention of parting with them unless the sheriff forces a sale. Blair thinks I can get a corking story and a chance at rare bargains. We'd like those, wouldn't we? It's my first out-of-town job, so to speak, and I'm keen for it. Blair has

been in the woods in October. He says that it does things to your soul as well as your appetite and muscle; doesn't it sound inviting?"

"Very," said Stanley unwillingly. "So you start to-night?"

"At eight—back by Friday or Saturday with a flock of old masters and Venetian brocades and some copy for the *Press*. It may prove a hoax but it's worth running to cover. You have to take trains and boats, wagons and canoes, all sorts of things to get to her."

"I'll miss you," interrupted Stanley in the same unwilling voice. "Of course I wish you luck—but I don't like you to go away on a *Press* assignment. I'd rather you went for a holiday . . . I can't get used to the other. I shall have Telva stay with me; she's a dear if one feels low in spirits—mental or otherwise! You've never seen the real girl."

"Probably not—but don't pledge yourself to buy too much of her stock—and don't hate Blair any more than he deserves. I'll be rustling around all afternoon getting set—good-bye until dinner; may we have it early?" bending to kiss her.

As he tore down the drive, Stanley threw aside her knitting with an angry gesture. She was no longer smiles and dimples, frightened, gentle eyes. Swords had come into their green, shining centers; she was an apprehensive, ruthless woman.

"More of Blair's work," she was thinking. "It will be Cairo next or a Manila correspondent—anything to get him away. Telva, much as I despise you, we are not going to let him go!"

CHAPTER XVII

BLAIR was right. A new world manifested itself as Ames's wagon jolted over the "thank-you-marms" in the Northern Ontario road. Miles removed from a postoffice or stores, the unpainted farmhouses were peopled with stoical Scotch and childlike Irish concerned chiefly with hard work and religious orthodoxy. A monosyllable from his driver equalled an intimate chat with a Dalefield contemporary. The unspoiled panorama of pine forests, blue, glistening lakes sparkling through the soft darkness of the trees, was lost upon this stolid native who chewed and spat and grumbled "*Yus*" and "*I nae be knowin'*" as occasion demanded.

For two uncomfortable but profitable months of the year summer boarders infested their territory, wearing white clothes and spending money in the belief that they had explored the north country. For the rest the natives possessed an undisputed world.

A worthwhile little world Ames decided as he breathed the pine air and admired the smooth lakes where an occasional motor-boat went cutting thin, violet shadows in the clear water.

Had it been November and the snow begun he might have been forced to try his luck on snowshoes. He was to stay at a tall, thin house down the road, the native begrudgingly informed him—Robertson's, pro-

nounced with a contagious brr that made Ames forget the profane and stirring atmosphere of the city-room and the sweet-scented one of his mother's little house . . . he was a mere human being, good, bad and indifferent by turn; he must prove that he had brawn as well as brain. What a life up here! What a chance to sweep away mental cobwebs! He was hungry, he would eat salt pork with alacrity and drink boiled tea sweetened with brown sugar . . . it would taste like the menu of some *cordon bleu*. He could sleep for hours on end, that calm, dreamless sleep of a normally tired man.

Ames turned towards his driver to ask if the Robertson house was far from that of the Russian princess?

"Nae," was the gruff reply.

"Miles or yards?" persisted Ames, offering his cigarettes.

The driver gave a scornful glance and proceeded to chew his tobacco with unfeigned superiority.

They jogged on in silence until, after sundry turns of the road with irregular edges of the blue lakes peeking out as milestones they came to the somber house where the wagon turned in. A gray-haired, gray-bearded, gray-eyed man in knee boots and homespun breeches, a gray flannel shirt opened to show his tanned chest, and a pair of old-fashioned, square-lensed glasses pushed up on his forehead greeted them.

"The dominie—Mr. Robertson," whispered the driver in a burst of confidence.

He set down Ames and his bag, exchanged a word with Robertson and drove off. Ames's inclinations were to eat and sleep rather than to be off to the Rus-

sian princess where he was to find art treasures and his first special story.

The Robertsons were shy of this obviously cosmopolitan transient. They showed him into a great square room with a pine bedstead, an ancient blue coverlet and a chest of mahogany drawers, a "splasher" pinned above the white bowl and pitcher. It was noon and dinner was waiting.

He ate ravenously of salt pork and turnips, drank a pot of the boiled tea with half of a squash pie and a square of cheese on the side. Thus fortified he sauntered along the road in the direction the dominie pointed. The conversation at table had been inspired by Ames. The Robertsons considered that a newspaper correspondent who declared that he had come to see the Princess Valja must be a trifle mad. The Robertsons had grown children who now lived "in the world," as they called it. The old people had been "in the world" on a few brief and disapproving occasions. In summer they had a cook from "the world" and served as many as seventy guests in the central tent dining-room.

They were non-committal as to the Russian princess until curiosity gained the better of natural reserve. Would he print facts about Valja in his "journal"? These might be difficult to obtain. Only Carol Clive knew her . . . did he not know of the Clives? Here the Robertsons had set down their teacups with an air of condescension as they proceeded to enlighten him.

A generation or so ago, time went slowly in the north woods, Jim Clive had been the idol of Covent Garden, a popular ballad and light opera singer. Of

excellent family, his grandfather a nobleman, he was engaged to a girl of his own sort, when he had had the bad taste to fall in love with a barmaid, a tall, straight, Norse goddess person with red-gold hair and clear blue eyes, the perfect sort of features that one sees on medals and Grecian coins. He had married her during a moment of chivalrous infatuation only to find his career blasted and his future ruined. Ostracized, he had taken a grant of land and brought his Bonny Bess out to the New World. With no knowledge of farming—and less of Bess—he had tried to stand his ground. The Robertsons waxed fairly eloquent in emphasizing the unusual part of the story. Bess more than stood by him—that she had! She had been wife and housekeeper and farmer as well. The Clive cabin grew into an irregular, rambling affair and Bess was acclaimed an authority on sheep. Old natives were not too proud to call upon her when the stock was ailing. She could kill a bull as deftly as she could coax roses to cover her bare fences. She bore Clive three children, two of whom were buried under apple-trees at the edge of his land.

Throughout the stress and loneliness of the years Clive had remained a gentleman, the man of mystery to some extent, never forsaking certain niceties of existence. His books, his small silver, his piano—these were part of his very life, his Bess guarding them jealously. If he regretted his marriage no one ever heard him admit it, least of all Bess. If colonial pioneering was too much for him he never faltered. If the one living child, Carol—like her mother physically and her father mentally—was his only solace, Bess was not the one to whine. She came to treat both Clive and Carol

with a pathetic respect, withdrawing to the kitchen whenever they began talking of books or music or of the world into which Clive insisted Carol must come.

Having made the farm pay and taught her husband the rudiments of the game, Bess had the good taste to die and be mourned while Clive stayed on in the north country and Carol went to the states for a winter or so to learn shorthand. On her return—here the Robertsons shook their heads—the poor child had fallen under the spell of this Russian derelict who had painted her in a dozen “outlandish ways,” claiming her as a secretary and drudge without pay. Jim Clive had not realized the enormity of Carol’s danger. He wore his frock-coat of a Sunday and sang his songs of an evening as serenely as if Carol were still at his side. But Carol had become fascinated by this weird Russian with her three saddle-horses and numerous dogs, cats, monkeys and parrots, chameleons and even snakes, it was reported. Moreover she wore draperies of heavy red crêpe, her hair was clipped close to her head and her jewels put to shame those in Toronto show windows yet she never paid a bill nor offered an explanation. Only Carol’s management permitted her to endure with the natives. Already there was a growing murmur of revolt.

“For we be no *omadawns*,” finished old man Robertson. “And she’s a bad ‘un and Carol’s got to be saved . . .”

Forearmed with these facts Ames approached the princess’s “estate.” Passing he recognized the Clive homestead by the Robertsons’ description, a rambling, gabled place with the ruins of the summer’s garden all about. To the left, through a grove of pines and along

the straight road until the first turn—another lake—and looking down at it somewhat superciliously was the near-chalet of the Princess Valja, painted a bold and interesting orange shade with king's blue shutters and doorways. A Russian eagle was raised on the flag staff and a flock of dogs came barking and wagging at the stranger.

For the first time during his adventure Ames felt uncertain, the enchantment of the woods vanished and the unreliability of the Slav temperament became a real issue. He tapped at the door which was flung open by a small lame woman with piercing golden eyes, her white hair standing up on her head in half-inch length bristles. Her red toga-like frock was held in place with a belt of hammered silver and bracelets of the same. A garnet necklace called attention to her wrinkled skin and as she waved her amber cigarette holder he noticed the barbaric looking rings crowding her tapering fingers.

"Who now—in the name of the devil?" she said in a swift, high voice with little trace of an accent.

"In the name of the *Dalefield Press*, madame," he answered quickly. "May a mere reporter learn a detail or so of your colorful history—and a dilettante in art be allowed the refusal of some of your treasures?"

"You hear him, Carol?" she called to a tall, slim girl in a scarlet flannel frock, a tam-o'-shanter of the same shade slipping over one ear. "Welcome, dilettante—away, reporter. Down, Sire, down, Flavia, down, Peter," to the hounds as they swarmed around. "Ah, Beppo," as a little ape climbed into her arms and twisted her necklace with a determined paw. "Come in, sir, do you like ruins? We are overstocked. Do you

like debt, sorrow, disgrace? We shall overwhelm you. This is my refuge, this is my Carol—Miss Clive, this is an American intruder. I do not know your name but we hate you already . . . so what does it matter?" dropping into a melancholy tone. "We are bored with you as we are with life. I am teaching Carol to be bored—a noble but an arduous occupation. She still—what do you call it?—bubbles over with enthusiasm, with hope. See, I am doing this canvas of her—an excellent subject only her nose is crooked. One never knows until one draws a face how imperfect are its features. . . . Vladimir, tea for the enemy," clapping her hands as an indistinct shadow-like person in shabby, baggy clothes left the room.

"Why am I hospitable to you? Because I hope for money," continued Valja seating herself by the open fire and beckoning for Ames to do the same. Carol had left her model's chair and come near Valja. She towered above the bent little woman with her wicked, lightish eyes. Carol's hair was like that of a Japanese maple. It was wound round her head in heavy, schoolgirlish braids. Her blue eyes seemed black in the dim light, their expression half hidden by the thick lashes. The Robertsons had been right. Her features were like those seen on medallions or anniversary coins, perfect, Grecian affairs, excepting the impulsive mouth which could rebuke and be tender all in a moment. She was fearless but untried, Ames decided as she looked at him with her fearless eyes as if demanding personal explanations.

On the easel was a fantastic study of Carol. She seemed one of her own remote ancestors in the black velvet frock with a plumed hat and the hounds grouped

at her side. As for the room, Ames mentally gasped and applauded by turns. Originally the "keeping room" of Canadian farmers, it was now a bizarre-like atelier. Barbaric tapestries and silver crucifixes vied for attention, wrought-iron lanterns with jeweled motifs and brass samovars cluttered the carved tables. An intricate sandalwood screen stood before half-finished canvases, statuary and a harp, a cello, bookcases untidily filled with foreign editions, were deposited here and there between worn wicker furniture. Cabinets crammed with curios and brassbound chests, trunks encrusted with steamer and hotel labels, were set about as if in an auctioneer's quarters. Dogs lay in all corners. Another spidery little ape ran up and down the portières as if they were a jungle tree. A divan with red velvet coverings was weighed down with a smoking set in Damascus brass, a jar of soiled brushes, and a writing portfolio heaped with dunning statements, no doubt. Above all and through all this gorgeousness were the farmhouse rafters.

Inside of an hour Ames found his intention of getting a special story for the *Press* set aside. Mentally he resigned from the *Press* as soon as he saw the frown in Carol's eyes at the thought of Valja's being projected into unsympathetic print. From now on he would represent only himself. He was neither haggling art dealer nor yellow journalist but a young man with too much time and money—would the princess consider parting with certain possessions? His mother had an appreciative eye for the beautiful.

"Before the sheriff or the bailiff or whatever you call the swine comes to rob me," said Valja coolly, as she puffed at a waterpipe and let an old cockatoo

perch on her shoulder. "But you Americans are crude and cold, as cold as the English . . . do you think I could find recognition in your noisy New York? No. If I were young and danced like a slave girl in a cabaret and told lies about my jewels being given by royal lovers—then New York would claim Valja. But to buy my pictures—no, they will have none of it. There is nothing left for Valja but—" with a telling gesture across her throat.

"Come, Valja, you're having one of your days." Carol's was the firm tone a nurse would use towards a refractory child. "This Mr.—Mr.—"

"Van Zile." Ames wondered if it would be possible to see Carol away from this barbaric place. The room typified his own mental state—just such a conglomeration of impressions and experiences with nothing definite and clear-cut like Carol's eyes.

"An American," said Valja pronouncing sentence with indulgence. "He is an American, Carol—do you realize that?"

Ames tried to proceed. "The *Press*, in which I'm—interested," he would put it that way, "received an Associated Press dispatch with an absurd rumor—"

"About my debts—oh, I know. They have baited me often enough—come, Bébé," to the old cockatoo who was biting the tarnished buckle of her silver necklace, "you still are faithful—and you—and you," to the various animals who stopped sleeping or whining or destroying property to look up at their mistress in devoted agreement. "I know and despise the wretched stories. So that was why you came . . . your wishing for my treasures is a ruse. You want to bargain for my love-letters! To write me 'up'—'up' here? That is

what I should like to know. Go away or I may kill you; you think I speak extravagantly—no, Carol, let me finish—I will kill you or the sheriff or whoever dares to hound a royal princess for debt. Money? I have seen my father throw gold to the crowd—gold that would buy this township—I have seen——”

“That does not matter, dear,” said Carol with gentle courage. “Let us listen to Mr. Van Zile—he is the sort to appreciate your treasures.”

A cunning smile lighted Valja’s pinched features. Her light, twinkling eyes seemed unearthly, as if a mask had suddenly come to life and twinkled malevolently.

“To appreciate my treasures—and make them yours—means that you must pay a good sum. I have only originals, do you understand?” clapping her hands and causing the cockatoo to flutter in fright. “I will not be questioned, pinned down like these Yankees try to do. In my country I would have tortured any who questioned my word . . . come, what appeals to you the most?”

Carol poured the tea Vladimir had brought in. “Let him look about,” she suggested. “Being one of your bad days you are unusually horrid. Plan on being yourself tomorrow and ask Mr. Van Zile for lunch. I want him to know the real you,” as the princess muttered in Russian and crossed herself with unnecessary fervor. As Carol handed him a cup of tea Valja turned to a casket-like box and took from it a brilliant green snake which writhed about her arm.

“You are the one to be appreciated,” Ames insisted, turning away from the snake and looking at Carol.

The blue eyes met his in an understanding smile.

Valja caught and resented it. "Two cold-hearted English things making fun of a royal old woman," she accused. "My snake Tsi-Tsi shall come and bite you and make you bloat and turn black—no," as the little serpent ran up and down the wrinkled arm and then coiled about the wrist, "not just yet. I have second sight," she added as she shook off the serpent into its box to the other's relief. "This man will come before me in your heart—you will be fool enough to love him and be hurt." Her shrill laugh made the old cockatoo screech in raucous imitation. "You will suffer—but not as Valja has suffered," rising, she made an imperious gesture of dismissal.

Carol soothed her. "You've been taking powders again, now, haven't you? Oh, my dear, whatever will you do when I leave you? Please, please come and lie down——"

"Send him away—and do not suffer," advised Valja as if she had not heard. "My young gentleman from the States, come to lunch tomorrow . . . one, two, three o'clock—whenever I happen to be ready—make up your mind what it is you wish and I will make up my mind what you must pay to have it. I am poor and broken in spirit—you must be generous." Her outstretched, claw-like hands reminded him of a public beggar. It did not seem as if this fearless-eyed young girl, who was preparing to leave, should be associated with such aristocratic débris. He wanted to take her away, learn what she thought and felt and find himself growing fearless and sincere.

His bow to Valja was more graciously received. He would be delighted to lunch with her to-morrow at one

or two or three o'clock. Unable to forego a last taunt, she called out to Carol something more about having second sight; this Yankee would not be worth the suffering.

Outside the strange house Ames drew a breath of relief. Turning to his companion, he explained:

"I passed your house on the way—I'm staying at Robertson's. Isn't there a longer way to go back? I want to talk to you, if I may."

Carol was considering even as she studied him. "There is a winding serpentine through the woods," she admitted. "We might try that. I want to see if Esther Tapley is about; I've some things for her but she won't come to see me. She lives in a cabin with her father and brother, a shy, wild thing; they say that she talks to the deer and they understand—we can cut through here," turning to a thicket of brush and leaping over the ruin of a fence. Ames followed. In the October sunlight he saw that her skin was firm and satiny with a natural, healthy pallor and that her eyes had dark, eager lights—there was the hint of a French ancestor. As she rested a hand on the fence rail he admired it for being lean and brown from the out-of-doors.

"I must know you," said Ames impulsively. At that moment his mother and Telva belonged to another lifetime. Only this Norse goddess seemed real. He felt as if he must throw off his coat and roll up his shirt-sleeves, work at some physical task—that might be one way of proving to those fearless eyes that he was worth while taking seriously.

"Why?" she demanded, pausing on the other side of the fence.

"Because I need to know someone like you I've had a rather strange life——" It was difficult to translate things into her simple language.

"Everyone has had a strange life—life is never anything else," her eyes turning in the direction of the Clive farm. "What has your strange life done to you?"

"Nothing—that's the worst of it. I'm in a fog; you make me feel as if I'd rather be in a storm."

"I'm in an open sea," she smiled almost tenderly. "We're all in a bad way—isn't that it? You know my father's story? Of course you do. No one who stops at the Robertsons' but hears it. In the summer the clerks and teachers are always walking by to get a look at us. At first I hated it but dad taught me to laugh—our story is better known here than my poor Valja's."

"Yes, they told me," admitted Ames. "It struck me as a particularly bully story. Your father must be the real thing. You are. Already I know you to be different from any other girl I ever met——"

"Just what did you come here for?" Carol ignored his compliments.

"A newspaper story which I chucked as soon as I saw that it would bar me from her presence—and yours. I turned into being a young dilettante which is what I really am. I've done reporting for a lark and because a man I like wanted me to try it. I mean to buy some of Valja's junk—because I want one of her portraits of you."

"Poor Valja," Carol detoured from the personal side of the conversation. "She has been taking morphine today—you must excuse her. Sometimes she is scintillating with wit and so much the princess that

you mentally make a genuflection every time she addresses you. Valja has taught me a great deal, but father taught me quite as much. Between them, I'm—I'm ready for the world." She smiled like a child who announces that it is ready for a holiday treat. "When Valja came up here to get away from everyone—including herself—she needed someone to take care of her. The polite name is secretary—but I can darn stockings beautifully! While I was darning them, Valja was teaching me many things. I may be untried but I'm a granddam in knowledge." Audaciously Carol drew a wisp of dried straw across Ames's forehead.

"Are you? Prove it. You happen to be a darling in spite of anything you may try to be——" He paused in embarrassment. Something odd was happening to him, a queer, vehement emotion which made him want to hold this tall, slim girl in his arms until she promised that he might show her the world. She must not regard him as an idle newcomer, put him on probation—he would be dominant, a super being, he wanted to work, to achieve—he was in love!

"Don't spoil what might be a happy friendship," he heard her saying. "I have never liked being made love to—although you would be different from the summer boarders. I'm not keen about love, as a matter of fact. I'm afraid of it. I've seen what it brought my father and Valja. My mother, who was a game little dear, took advantage, nevertheless, of father's chivalry. She should never have let him marry her."

"Nonsense," objected Ames, "what on earth——"

"She couldn't help loving him—but she ought to have realized that marriage would ruin his life. True love never harms. To marry Jim Clive was a triumph

for which mother was brave enough to pay the price for ever after. Only father was obliged to pay it, too. There is Valja too—her loves have brought her to where she is, poor, mad, headed for disaster, no matter if you buy all her treasures. She'll only run back to Europe to give the money away or buy up mistreated circus animals or take more morphine—love has ruined Valja. I'm glad that I'm merely an accurate typist," her pink lips set in a straight line.

"Do you think that will prevent you from ever being in love?" asked Ames.

"Perhaps not—but I shall marry no one——"

"Nonsense—you who were born to be loved."

"I've not finished," she interrupted gravely. "I shall never love anyone unless my love can help them. Oh, but I mean it. You must remember that I know much of the world and the love between men and women. Love and sacrifice are often one and the same." The blue eyes were so eager that Ames found himself floundering for an emphatic answer.

"Theoretically you are right." He was contrasting this girl with Telva and the rest of Telva's kind, the modern daughters who pride themselves upon being "the egg in the coffee" and who publish their theories "right out of the top drawer." . . . His mother's small, exquisite self came before him try as he would to banish the picture. For now he did not want to analyze Stanley's ideas as to love, but the mental picture of her remained as if hanging in a frame of crimson maple leaves. "Remember, you are all that I have. Without you life would be unlivable," she seemed to be saying.

"Have you ever worked hard at anything?" de-

manded Carol. They were walking again along the winding trail, Carol ahead, her scarlet clad self dancing and darting in and out of the bends of the path.

“Why, of course—what a question.”

“What an idea, you mean. But you haven’t. I knew it the moment I saw you. You have the look, the something that says ‘I’ve never tried myself out—hardly worth the effort.’ . . . Oh, you must get to work,” she commanded.

“Why?” Ames came up beside her and held her by her arm.

“Because then you could understand what I’ve just said. I’ve always worked hard—so has dad—so did mother. Valja has worked,” she added vehemently as if to put him to shame. “You may not think so but she has done everything from interior decorating and translating to going out as a nursery governess to the nouveaux riches—only the drug makes her unreliable. She takes it to forget love! She has always said that one can afford to lose a sense of honor rather than a sense of humor—when the last goes, it is time to make an end. When I am with her I forget the north woods and that erratic house—I live in her colorful world of the past. We have traveled far, we two—with that farmhouse floor as our quarter-deck. I owe much to Valja—”

“Before she came here whatever did you do—whom did you know?” insisted Ames.

“Father and the natives—the woods. Mother died when I was fifteen. (I think she was rather glad.) I went to the States for a winter or so. Valja began to paint me as well as teach me. I take her dictation, for she corresponds with everyone under the sun, moon

and stars. Dad was glad for her; he knew that she gave me a peephole into the sort of world he had left because of love," her lips curving in disdain.

"How old are you?" Ames might have been cross-examining an important witness.

"Twenty-three; how old are you?" Carol might have been examining one equally as important.

"Twenty-six. I'm the only son of the most wonderful woman in the world," he spoke softly as if Stanley might overhear, "no, the second most wonderful woman . . . I've just met the first."

"Not that sort of gallantry or we'll get nowhere." The blue eyes were relentless.

"Carol," the name came to his lips naturally, "as if anyone could not be——"

"I will not be ridiculed even if I am a rustic secretary to a mad princess . . . I sha'n't forget that my father was Clive of Covent Garden." She began walking ahead.

"I shall remember you as the most wonderful woman in the world," insisted Ames. "As for myself I live in Dalefield because the Van Zile interests are there—lately, as I told you, I've been reporting. I'm waiting for a real job, the sort that would make you take me seriously."

"What does your mother wish you to be?" was the next interrogation.

"Her son, always and forever." There was relief in the admission.

Carol studied him for a moment. "You are weak—with the possibility of becoming unbelievably strong," she decided. "Dad will agree. Come for supper—it's to be merely salmon loaf, nut bread, and jam. Dad likes

to meet real people." She paused as if annoyed at her inference.

"Then I am real to you?" Ames pleaded.

After a moment's hesitation she said soberly, "I'm afraid so—very real. I wish you were not. I don't like to take people seriously. I mean young people," with naïve reasoning. "I take dad and Valja seriously but I don't want to like anyone else—just yet," with the reluctance at having shared a secret.

"As if you had any chance to escape," murmured Ames. "You're delicious——"

"Ah, but not to be taken seriously? That is always the way when one is spontaneously honest." The sternness in her voice made him apologize.

"Of course I take you seriously—but may I venture to suggest that you are not quite certain of what you have said? You were made to love and to be loved." In this exhilarating setting with this young goddess determined to remain aloof from life, Ames found himself feeling intensely alive. He wished for an adjoining farm as an obvious excuse to remain near Carol. Instinctively he wanted to keep her in this setting lest she change or be harmed by leaving it. She was so unspoiled, so eager, the wilful, splendid sort that champions lost causes. He wondered what her opinion would be if she really knew. . . . Knew what? Ames asked himself in irritated self-defense. What strange track of reasoning had this odd excursion incited? Was it only two days ago that he had been arguing with Stanley against Telva, sitting in the little drawing-room and telling himself that he must do as its mistress dictates? This girl would never do as Stanley dictated; Telva would pretend that she did.

"I wish to love no one if it will hurt or hamper," Carol repeated. "It may have been wrong to say that I was never going to love—if we can only guess at what waits around the corner we can keep clear of corners!" With a teasing smile she entered the pergola gateway leading to the house.

Ames followed but his thoughts went straying back to Blair and his mother, of the unbearable time when he must return. Was it that he had escaped? Could Carol understand—would it not be treason to attempt telling her? She would misjudge, become prejudiced. He wanted to stay on and on, go hauling wood with a refractory team, be asleep by eight and up at dawn, drink boiled tea and eat flapjacks and pork and canned beans—and have Carol take him seriously.

Jim Clive welcomed him with the pathetic restraint with which an exile welcomes a transient of his own renounced caste. In the Clive living-room with its stone fireplace and bright chintzes, Carol and her father entertained him with tales of blizzards and wolf packs and summer boarders, the snowed-in months when one's house was the universe, when books and a pipe, a glass of grog and tinned food were the daily programme. When an uncertain, capricious hint of spring blew away at the windows, one became ridiculously enthusiastic and fancied the chirp of a songbird because the bare limbs gave a hint of swollen buds. They talked of Valja—her extravagances, her sins and her saintliness, her absurd generosities, her indignation when her offer to supply in the pulpit while the dominie was ill was refused, of the superstition and disapproval with which the natives regarded her. As the night grew old Carol left her father with Ames—

she would see him at the one, two, three o'clock luncheon. He need not fear but what Valja would sell her treasures—he must be prepared to pay a ridiculous price. Or she might give them away if he happened to please her.

When the men were alone Jim Clive, more than ever the gentleman and artist in spite of his homespun suit and briar pipe, turned to Ames with the frankness which is never misunderstood between men of honor and said: "Carol's a quaint thing . . . you like her?" his slim, tapering fingers with their painfully calloused tips tapping on his chair arm.

"Very much, sir," admitted Ames.

"She has never been in love nor known the world as you and I know it . . . of course you know the story—you're staying at the Robertsons'! You're an attractive and experienced young man—don't hurt her . . . she has weird notions in that red-gold thatch of hers. Sometimes they worry me. By the way, what's your job?"

"I'm to look after my father's estate or read law," Ames confessed with reluctance. Among these surroundings the thought that he was doing nothing seemed doubly the disgrace that it had when Blair made game of him. "My father was a rich meat packer, my mother a beautiful young actress. Being an only child, she has dedicated herself to me," his eyes strayed over to the mantel where a finished canvas of Carol was hung.

"But you must be something of your own making, man—what will you do with all the years ahead?" persisted Clive, rapping the ashes out of his pipe.

"Quite so. I'm casting about—I don't want to man-

age a milk-and-water estate—clip bond coupons and collect rents, that sort of tame-cat stuff. . . . I really don't know," staring into the fire while Clive estimated him critically.

"A spoiled boy," he said briefly, "but don't spoil my girl . . . that's a warning."

Ames found his way back through the frosty night. A kerosene lamp and a featherbed awaited him and a sleep broken by dreams in which a Titian-haired goddess laughed at him and said, "What have you done with your life—nothing—nothing—nothing—she wouldn't let you," and went away before he could explain.

By one the next day Ames presented himself at Valja's. The princess chose to beam upon him and, at half after three, serve her choicest luncheon of cold cabbage and beer soup, creamed mushrooms, a fig pudding, champagne and black coffee, after which she held court in her conglomerate living-room, bargaining off her treasures at top prices—making him a present of something which he did not in the least desire—and all the time watching him as he tried to study Carol and not be detected in the deed.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT was six weeks before Ames returned to Dalefield. Six swift, revolutionizing weeks for him, six uncertain ones for Stanley. From the first she had mistrusted this journey. When Blair laughingly informed her that Ames had written in his resignation and refused to send any story concerning the mad princess but was staying on for a rest and to pick up antiques, Stanley had been on the defensive.

"Probably he's in love," Blair advanced as explanation for Ames's cropper regarding the *Press*. "A corking news story foozled without just cause. Only love does that sort of thing. Valja is older than yourself, watch out! He's bringing home silver crucifixes and mandarin embroideries and some paintings—a lot the *Press* cares for them. Here is a woman who escaped when the Czar was murdered, who has had more lovers than any other princess in Europe—she fairly teems with 'copy' yet your son writes that he has chucked his job and will bring back some superb Ming vases! Now what? Checkmate?"

"It is delight in new surroundings that keeps him away." Stanley wondered if she sounded convincing. "If he is in love it is not with this absurd Valja . . . she has a secretary," she added grudgingly. "He said so in a letter . . . oh, Blair, what a beast you are," as Blair shrugged his shoulders. "Let me alone

—let Ames alone—what is it you want? Because, long ago, I could not care——”

“We won’t call it just that,” Blair’s voice made Stanley regret her last sentence. “What do I want of you? Your son. It is no use to fight. It is something about which you can do nothing. He is your son, but my comrade.” His tired eyes were as mocking as they were triumphant.

That night Stanley sent for Telva Monroe to return and stay with her. Another heart attack threatened. Incidentally she labored with Telva against her present occupation. Something must be done—Telva must not dabble in outlawry. Such a wilful yet innocent child! In time Stanley hoped that—turning appealing eyes upon Telva who was calculating all it might or might not mean if she became Stanley’s daughter-in-law. Telva was averse neither to Ames nor his income! She was inclined to forego bootlegging uncertainty for an assured position. Before all else Telva was a first-water poseuse. Her flair for independence was merely a parlor trick. She was wearied of her irregular life, the tiptoe attitude at which she was obliged to remain. It was no easy feat to attend the most select reading classes in order to approach prospective “clients” successfully. Occasionally her bills worried her, even her much heralded hotel with its generous supply of hot water and clean towels palled. But this Stanley-creature to whom she must bow—she was a matter to be well considered. If only Sam Russell had money! Sam would be an ideal husband. But Ames was reported to have a million. As she listened to Stanley’s appeal, Telva longed to escape that she might refresh the innet woman with an old-fashioned cocktail.

The next day Stanley wired for Ames; she was ill and needed him. The message reached him at the close of his sixth week in the north woods. Snow was warning stray transients to hurry home. The semiweekly train running to Fox's Point had been changed to a weekly schedule.

Ames obeyed the summons as a soldier obeys the order to mobilize. There was no alternative.

"I won't say good-bye," he told Carol as he came into the Clive living-room late in the afternoon. "My mother, who is ill, has sent for me. Perhaps I've been a careless truant. I've left word with Valja as to sending the things—please give her this," handing Carol a check. "You're in charge of the royal treasury, I take it—the things can follow at leisure—but I wish you'd hurry to Dalefield. We need you," holding her hand.

"I'd be afraid to come to Dalefield—"

"You—afraid?"

"We are all afraid of something," she said in a breathless voice. "You are afraid of—her," pausing as if frightened at her own boldness.

"You mean—my mother?"

Carol nodded. "Terribly afraid—you are still a little boy who has grown-up tantrums on the side," pointing at him with a telltale finger.

For a moment Ames was inclined to be angry—largely because he had been found out. Carol voiced a repressed and incoherent conviction. Not even Blair had succeeded in clarifying it. During the first days of their acquaintance he had told Blair: "I don't mind how rough you come at me for anything—but keep my mother's name out of the conversation."

"You must not jump at conclusions," he told Carol

emphatically. "You have never seen my mother——"

"You are afraid of her. She loves you so much that she has taken care to make you afraid." Carol was not to be silenced. "I know—Valja would have so loved me had I let her. But dad had warned me—love must be free before it can be lasting. Oh, you won't believe that I am worldly wise——"

"Whatever are you driving at?" Uninvited Ames took refuge on the settle and began playing with the fire set. "You are the strangest girl I have ever met. One moment you say you will never love anyone—having seen the tragic results of legalized love. The next moment you accuse me of being afraid of my blessed little mother because she loves me too much. You are as adorable as you are inaccurate. You've been cheated yourself, if you'll only realize it. No one with such eyes and hair has the right to stay pent up in the woods with a Russian derelict and a peach of an old chap who has shot his bow—and knows it. Since you advocate frankness, isn't that what your life amounts to? Come to Dalefield and talk it out with my maternal ogress . . . let me find you something to do—there are plenty of chances. I don't know what you did when you were in Detroit studying shorthand but——" A curl of his lips finished his scornful surmise.

"It was deadly. A Christian boarding-home for young women, Bible classes and visits to the zoo on Sundays. I worked in the office of a box factory last winter. A bookkeeper once gave me a pound of Saturday-night chocolates. I had no money for clothes and the woman who ran the boarding-house gave me a reduced rate for helping wait table at her Sunday dinners. Perhaps I came back from 'the world' with a

skimpy sense of values—oh, I had glimpses of other things," she admitted suddenly. "I could have had pay-as-you-wear-them clothes and gone on petting parties if I had liked," slipping down beside the settle onto a huge ottoman. The light from the fire made her hair seem bright, dancing waves.

"Of course you could—but naturally you wouldn't. I object to your earth-deities. Valja and your father in giving you their warped sense of values have told you only a fraction of the truth."

"They have dared to say that things aren't always tophole. Which is more than your chattering modernists dare to admit. Of course I'm odd," with a trifle of reluctance. "I've uneven abilities. I can pick out a good rug from an acid-washed one and I have a notion or so about music. I've read Dickens and Thackeray and *Mr. Sponge's Sporting Tour* to father when I might have been reading *Flaming Youth* things and acquiring chiffon frills. I've come to know the court life and that of the operatic stage of a generation ago—instead of the whereabouts of the last shipment of hootch and who got ducked in the horse pond because they were so tight that they ate the hostess's bowl of cherished shamrocks in the delusion that they were watercress . . . that sort of drivel. I've found my own reliable God in the woods instead of the fashionable anti-Christ propaganda that the modernists are featuring. If I'm out of step I'm able to run ahead and not let any of you trip me." She stopped, catching her underlip as if she wanted to tell more of the truth but feeling unfairly silenced.

"You're a darling," summarized Ames, wondering how much more it would be wise to say just now.

"You are wonderful," she responded to his amusement.

"I'm thinking aloud," she added, "when I tell you that I like you very much; that I hate saying good-bye. I liked you from the moment you came into Valja's house. I realized that you were someone I should always remember—I began being rather sorry for both of us. I saw that you were involved, as overly civilized as I am primitive. But liking someone is a thing over which no one has any control. It just—happens."

"Thank God for the primitive . . . which is my 'overcivilized' way of saying that I'm happy you like me." He reached for her hand.

"I'm sorry that you are going—but I'm not coming to Dalefield—"

"Sure of that last? Never going to come and play for a while, be able to despise us all the more?" half teasing, half pleading.

"Sometimes I want to come and play—I've moods when I'd sell my soul to have a sleeveless frock of ivory satin and brocaded slippers and a great cape of ermine lined with rose and my hair cut an Eton crop. I'd carry a cigarette case and a hip flask and go racing into the night in someone's high-powered car to stop at some gay place all twinkling lights and thrumming jungle music. I'd sip wine and eat frozen pudding and have someone—no, a dozen someones hold me close while we danced. I'd say all the smart nothings of the moment, straggle home at dawn to sleep and sleep—until it was time to wake up and do it all over!" She seemed amazed at her own outburst.

Ames was laughing. "For a primitive person that's

a rather civilized flock of wishes. Come and try it—it isn't as terrible as one might think. Oh, Carol dear——”

“That was a mad reverie which we all have. Even staid bank presidents sit behind mahogany desks and dream of the Spanish seas, rescuing beautiful maidens and stowing away the chests of gold. Of course I sha'n't come . . . I may never see you again,” she ended with a new determination.

“You think not? Try to escape me.” Ames was enjoying himself, the sting of the good-bye had lessened. Perhaps Carol was more the wild-woods child than the serious woman. She was so wisely yet unfairly informed. It would be so easy to hurt her—almost as easy as to love her! How beautiful the fire made the braids of red-gold hair—what other woman in the world but Carol could have worn the Mother Hubbardish dress with the charm of Grecian draperies . . . Carol must come to Dalefield; he must see her again.

“Don't try to see me,” she begged. “I'll promise to come to you if I change my mind—is that a bargain?”

“Perhaps—but if you don't come I'll not promise to keep it. You're right in many things—very right. But you're wrong in one or two. Put the blame on the proper culprit: it is not my mother's fault that I'm unsettled and on the wing. Being here with you has made me more sure of what I want to do than I've ever been.”

“You were away from her,” Carol started to say but checked herself in time.

“You might find something of the same thing hap-

pening if you come to Dalefield. We're not a suburb of Sodom and Gomorrah. If any such thing should occur—ah, but it might—and you should find yourself foot-loose, not sure of what was best to do, promise that you'll come to us the first of all. You needn't play with us unless you choose, you can work all day and board at a deaconess' home—but don't forget that I'll always be wanting to see you."

The old clock croaked out with malicious promptness that it was time to leave. Carol started—she must be with Valja as early as possible—she must pretend that it was nothing heroic to say good-bye to this spoiled man o' dreams. While she struggled to do so she became conscious that tears stood in her eyes.

"I don't want you to go—very poor technique to let you see how I care," she began between a sob and a laugh. "But I do . . . I'm primitive enough to be frank and say that I cared from the very first . . . Valja was right. I wonder if any other girl, isolated from life itself yet tutored in its tragedies, has ever cared in the same swift, sad way . . . I don't expect you to realize all that it means to me—or to return it . . . you need to grow up before you could do the last. You need—oh, my dear—you need someone to stand by you not over you . . . sometimes that takes courage." Before either knew how it happened Carol came into his arms—a timid, confused girl who had admitted her tender secret.

Ames's reaction of joy was followed by one of confusion and regret. He must be more sure of himself—Carol was so unspoiled, his mother was ill.

"Dearest," patting her awkwardly, "you are as

sweet as you are intense—but wait—think this all out and be certain just what you are letting yourself feel——”

She looked up with startled eyes. “That could never change things—it is one of the things that just happen! Perhaps I would have prevented it as readily as you had I had any choice. I told you that first day that I was afraid to love——”

“Stop being afraid—and find the right person,” he advised: “keep on liking me tremendously.” Ames was kissing her hair, her neck, tilting back her head to find her lips.

She drew away and looked at him accusingly. “You must remember that we care so differently,” she said gently, as if explaining it to a refractory child. “You are having a new sort of thrill. Father warned me. He said: ‘A fine enough lad but not a man for any woman just now.’”

“Your caring is an undeserved honor.” The feeling of joy caused him to forget the waiting wagon. It seemed as if he would leave strength and truth when he left this girl. “Carol dear, there is so much more to say to each other—we’ve only begun the chapter together. If I’m not primitive as you put it, I’m not decadent,” drawing her to him and kissing her again on the lips. “I’m happy that your ‘poor technique’ made you say the truth. It isn’t a game we are playing, there is no need for tricks. I’m glad you love me, I never want that fact to cause you regret. If I could take you away with me, darling, I’d keep on feeling sure that everything would be all right. But something tells me not to rush or promise—or make you wretched. Won’t you keep thinking that I want to see you, that you are

the finest thing that has ever come into my life? I must prove worthy of it," so he left her, turning from his seat in the wagon to catch the last glimpse of her blue frock and shining braids, her eyes smiling through their tears.

Carol went up to her room. She had forgotten her appointment with Valja. Inside of an hour the latter presented herself at Clive's doorstep to demand the reason for Carol's delay.

"The mischief's done," Jim Clive explained. "The boy went back—she's upstairs crying—soft, long sobs that show she's using her brains as well as her lachrymal glands . . . a jolly fix!"

"He has made her suffer just as I said." Valja was malevolent in her sympathy. "I shall crack the porcelains before I pack them for his sainted mother! I wish I had charged him twice as much—an admirable enough young man but a weak chin. Never the man for Carol. She'd have to be sacrificed as you sacrificed, Clive, my friend—as I sacrificed—and for what?"—with an expressive gesture of her wrinkled fingers.

"A fine lad—he may be a man in time," Clive corrected, drawing out his pipe. "We'll not mention him to her—eh—is that a bargain?"—a trifle anxiously.

Valja's face quivered. "Not mention him," she repeated as if weighing the matter. "If only the rest of the world had been as thoughtful as you, Clive, I'd have less wrinkles and sounder sleep these latter days."

CHAPTER XIX

PARTLY due to worry over Tante, who had been discharged from the nursing-home and walked out daily only to come to grief over a curb with a fractured knee-cap as a result, Stanley had given way to her obscure heart trouble.

She explained this in pensive murmurs as Ames sat beside her bed. He stroked her hand as she added that she was worrying over money, losses had befallen certain shareholders in one-time gilt-edge securities. There had been the fitting up the house—she had wanted to please him no matter what it cost . . . it was their first home, in a sense. Moreover, this particular loss was the result of an investment Ames had made, an initial try at managing affairs . . . of course, it might easily have happened to anyone and he must not feel at fault, but his being away on a wild-goose chase and not within reach of telephone, of writing that he had resigned and had bought a caravan of antiques and paintings and was so enchanted with this strange country that he stayed on and on—was it only for the air and hunting? with a quick side-glance from her bright eyes.

“We didn’t hunt—we split wood and brought in logs and did winter chores—a gymnasium in the rough, you might say. I’m feeling remarkably fit. It was one of those vacations which men take and never exactly

explain to themselves—civilization suddenly getting too much for them, they bolt. But you, you are thin and I believe there is a traitor of a gray hair—'Od's bodikins, what shall be done?" bending over to kiss her.

Stanley smiled. Then she sat upright among her flock of tiny, lace-trimmed pillows and pulled the satin quilts over her knees. "Do you know that I worried lest you fall in love with some Evangeline? Come, you can't blame me—boys have gone away and fallen in love pell-mell as infants tumble in the mud after being dressed for the afternoon. Russians are as fascinating as they are uncertain. This woman was old, was she not?—she has probably loved many times," with patronizing tenderness.

Ames's laugh was reassuring. "She is seventy and half mad. Her house is a hodge-podge of monkeys and rare paintings on silk, waterpipes and first editions, snakes and Tanagra figurines . . . no, *mia*, I am not in love with the Russian."

"She had a companion—a secretary?" deduced Stanley so quickly that Ames started as if a door had made an unexpected sound.

"An unofficial and altogether unusual person," rattling on in his lightest manner to describe Carol, stressing the story of Carol's father and the life the two had lived. "A dear, queer girl," he ended, rather amazed at his not having told Stanley more. "She has brains as well—nothing of the fragile chiffon and boyish bob construction about her—nothing of Telva's vivid—"

"Oh, Telva's a lamb," defended Stanley; "she has been as considerate of me as if she were my daughter.

I worry about her. The child doesn't comprehend what she is doing. It has all come about because her mother's a fool and Telva is too proud to take a loan."

"You offered one?" said Ames. From what he knew of Telva she was neither too proud nor too stupid to ask for aid. There had been those pseudo-loans that are arranged at a country club Saturday night dance when one is walking on the terrace and enjoying the glow of a twin orange-blossom cocktail rather more than that of the moon.

"She is received everywhere," Stanley urged. "This nonsensical veneer covers a proud little thoroughbred who happens to be awfully fond of you."

Ames rose. "A noble defense, *mia*—Telva's fond of a lot of us, but I think Sam ought to be the victim and not your son."

"Isn't she attractive and clever and a wonderfully loyal friend? As well as being alone and a dear?" insisted Stanley, her hands holding onto Ames's with a fresh grip. "Blair, that thing of tatters, does not like her and has influenced you. *He* sent you on this trip," her green eyes regarding the November twilight with a threatening gaze.

"No, Blair doesn't care for Telva; he is indifferent to women, as a matter of fact, and to a great many men including himself. Blair has not influenced me." Ames squared his shoulders as if that finished the accusation. "*Mia*, let's go south and hunt sunshine, come back in March when everyone will tell us all the good times we missed. I'll settle down and learn the things Sam has tried to tell me. The shop won't go to smash before then and I'm not in the mood for grubbing . . . I want to get away again . . . if

it can't be the north woods let it be the tropics. I'm still reeking with the scent of pines and bacon cooked out-of-doors, the memories of dour natives with an unexpected sense of humor——”

“And Carol Clive,” Stanley wisely refrained from saying.

“I agree—let's go some place on a boat—do the old West Indies again, pretend you're a little boy and that I know almost as much as your nurse,” hoping for enthusiasm in his reply.

Idly, Ames consented. They discussed Tante; she must stay at the house if she liked, dear old Tante, what a responsibility she was getting to be.

Ames was lack-luster on the subject. In earlier days his mother had created a permanently polite state of misunderstanding. When Tante hinted that he was spoiled, Ames was told that Tante thought him “a horrid, screaming little imp—she would rather not come to the house until he was asleep,” and he had contrasted Tante's humble but sincere presents of marbles or a hand-made kite with his mother's lavish offerings. He had listened to Stanley's well-colored version of earlier days when Tante was the unfeeling guardian and had sent her to a beastly boarding-school to be snubbed and underloved until she chose New York as a means of escape. A polite tolerance existed between this grim old woman who admired the boy as she pitied him and this handsome young thing who was impatient concerning her.

Stanley now took up the next argument: Telva. Ought not Telva come along? She had a cough and was thin. Her situation was distressing in its danger. Telva would prove an admirable *tertium quid*; Ames

was certain to grow bored with a nervous old mother . . . ah, but he was to be pardoned if that was the case . . . she understood.

Bending to kiss her before he left to report to Blair, Ames felt a reproachful pang. He must never leave Stanley, nor disappoint her, not even for Carol—not for all the Carols in the world.

The first week in December there sailed from New York Mrs. Stanley Van Zile, her son Ames and Telva Monroe. Dalefield had cause to whisper approving asides to the effect that there never could have been serious scandal between Tony Monroe and Mrs. Van Zile—was not his daughter going to the West Indies with them and, undoubtedly, would marry Ames? Lucille Monroe had been a fanatic as is often the plight of ugly women with handsome husbands.

Telva's friends voted it "too perfect" and "lummy" and drew a sigh of relief that the federal agents had not come down upon her red-handed, Creole ancestry or no. Marrying Ames would be a ripping match, and they laid bets as to how Telva would defeat her mother-in-law. If Stanley's heart was in reality "as tender as asphalt," as her possible daughter-in-law had asserted, a large number of the former's allies were willing to believe that Telva Monroe "ate babies for breakfast" and pity Stanley for the hardships ahead.

Telva herself had reached a state of mental calm. If she did not return with Ames's engagement ring, she would have obtained the courtesy of the port due to Stanley's influence and a goodly cargo of contraband would be waiting for her at the wharf!

Watching the harbor line grow indistinct in an icy

mist, Ames glanced about with relief to find himself alone. His mother and Telva had gone below for the absorbing process of unpacking.

The tropics until March—Telva and his mother—a hundred thousand dollars lost because of his fool speculation—he was twenty-six—almost twenty-seven—and Blair had laughed at him in lieu of a good-bye. Carol's last letter was in his pocket, a typically audacious, pitiful little letter saying that she should always care but she was glad that he was not coming back. He was “spoiled”—if this made him angry, she could not retract the truth for the reward of making him smile. In the few weeks since he had left her he had written often, always tenderly, sometimes with matter-of-fact postscripts about what he intended doing. He had tried to argue against her staying with her father through the winter rather than coming down to the States—even Valja had shut up her “bazaar” and fled to her beloved Florence. What right had Carol to stay away from life? Was she not the greater coward of the two? To which she had answered that she could not yet come away—she loved him even as she was sorry this was the truth.

“Sorry,” Ames repeated as he sought out the smoking-room. “Carol, I'm not worth being sorry about.”

The second week in March saw the Van Ziles in New York, Telva having gone to New Orleans. She dared to invade the home of her ancestors by reason of her recent engagement to Ames Van Zile. It had all happened at St. Kitt's, according to Telva's letters—the only really exciting thing during the trip. At St. Kitt's there had been a hurricane and a compromising but perfectly thrilling night spent in a cave with Ames

—a pirate treasure hunt and a big, fuzzy German who wanted to elope with her and a poisonous spider bite that had made Mrs. Van Zile's dimpled cheek twice its size and frightened her son into spasms—and agreement . . . the engagement was the result of this human pot-pourri . . . it was all ducky and very much “heavenly bunting” stuff, as the letter concluded. To date Ames had been merely coy and cooing but her ring was almost a three carat diamond with a circlet of pigeon-blood rubies and she was well on the way to getting her choice of her mother-in-law’s best laces.

CHAPTER XX

AMES returned to town with nothing of his mother's and Telva's triumphs. He dreaded getting into line, as he termed it. What he dreaded was facing reality, accepting the inevitable. He planned on writing Carol the news at once. The peacock-blue sky and seas, the smooth pink-sanded beaches of the sleepy, half-forgotten towns, the atmosphere of an everlasting *fiesta* had precluded writing a coolly-worded, snow-flaked, North American announcement: "I am engaged to be married, I hope you will agree that this is best and that our knowing each other was a thrilling episode to be remembered tenderly but without regrets," etc., etc.

Instead he had deluged her with souvenir books and a lace mantilla, experiencing a schoolboy guilt in doing so. Inwardly, he found himself fretting because he had no word from her—save a note forwarded from Dalefield and catching them in Havana, an unsatisfactory communication telling of the last blizzard and the way the wolves howled each night, how she hoped to persuade her father to sell the farm and take her back to England. She realized that his sadness was the sadness of age. A cottage on his beloved moors and he would be well content. At the last, in the clear, straight hand that seemed a mental symbol of her blue eyes, she had said: "I miss you—as I shall always miss you. Do you understand?"

Before he had written to Carol—which meant before the little red jewel-box in Dalefield was cluttered with packing cases and wardrobe trunks on this first day of their return, Telva came sweeping up the drive in Stanley's electric brougham to spread the glad tidings.

She rushed upstairs to where Stanley was listening to the housekeeper's report. Brushing the latter aside she announced in her most vivacious manner:

“Dear future mamma, upon what do you think your son took an option in the north woods? Nothing less than the reincarnation of Helen of Troy done in henna and innocence! She has come to Dalefield either to be declined or accepted—a trifle awkward considering,” twisting her engagement ring with an exaggerated gesture.

“Helen of Troy?” said Stanley in amused alarm. “Ames, is Telva trying to create a scene? Come forth and be masterful”—walking into the hallway and standing at his door.

In dressing-gown and slippers, his hair uncombed and his face flushed, Ames left off unpacking and obeyed.

“To proceed: when I went back to my wreck of a hotel,” ran on Telva, “I found the place in an uproar—not over our engagement, dear me, no, but over one Carol Clive who had arrived from the aurora borealis or some place as spectacular and remote. She had been with them a fortnight. Her father had been killed by an accident, a stroke or something, so she decided to follow on to Dalefield. You told her that would please you above all else. She is Cinderella without a fairy godmother; moreover she does not need any. Jealous?

I'm growing more Russian than ten Valjas—when I attack, I scratch," making passes at him.

"Ames, did you actually promise the girl work?" asked Stanley anxiously.

"Of course I did; she is deucedly capable. She would have no trouble in finding work if I didn't have it to offer. She must have been through a frightful time up in that wilderness—her father was all she had."

"She lost no time in accepting your offer," murmured Stanley.

"*Mia*, she is the real thing. I'd believe whatever Carol told me. She expects people to mean what they say just as she does. She hasn't an affected atom in her nature. All I regret is not being here when she came; think what she must have gone through." Ames felt as if he were being spied upon when there was nothing whatsoever to discover. He struggled to convince himself that as soon as his mother and Telva saw Carol they would understand.

"They are keen about her," Telva added begrudgingly, "chiefly because they are waiting to see what will happen. She has the poise of an archduchess, the innocence of a teething babe and the wardrobe of an indigent grandmother! Am I to be set aside, Ames, or is it to be a slow, lingering process of your making me see that we are not suited—"

"Not so long as you have anything to do with it," Ames bantered. "Meantime—what has Carol been doing?"

"She is a practical Helen of Troy," Telva admitted. "She took the cheapest room they had and waited only a day for you to answer. As soon as she found you were cruising in the Caribbean she found a job all herself—

and where do you suppose she found it? In Sam's place of piracy! Yes, indeed, Sam is dotty about her because she knows how to spell and never has phone calls. I dropped around to get Sam's version of the thing."

"Nonsense." Stanley could bear the baiting no longer. Telva irritated her as she had always irritated her. The more she saw of her self-selected daughter-in-law the more positive were her conclusions: first, that she never could become fond of her—not that she disapproved of the present generation's brand of unscrupulousness, their bleating out every unlovely thought and intention—it was that Telva lacked brains, personality and shallow wit aside. Her second reaction was a consoling one: she was forever assured of her son's devotion and confidence. Once married he would regard the obligation solemnly only to contrast Telva's frankly selfish tactics with his mother's studied charms.

"Nonsense," she found herself saying again, "as if there was anything unusual in the situation. Ames told me about her—I'm prepared to enjoy Carol as a novelty; do have her up for tea. She must be lonely; perhaps she has some affairs that we can look after."

Ames gave her a grateful glance.

"I'll wager that Ames gave her the first kiss she ever had." Telva was irrepressible. "So she naturally found her way to Dalefield——"

Again Stanley interposed. She championed Carol so tenderly that Ames had a mad idea of bringing Carol to stay at the house.

"So we're to Big Sister her," Telva pouted, "get her good-looking hats and bargains in coats, lead her up to the moneyed mob and say, 'Which of you wants her the most?' Perhaps she'll turn serious and woman's

rightish and we'll have to pull political wires to get her a snug berth. Either way it is trying—with all that I have to do."

Before the afternoon ended Stanley and Telva began to avoid any mention of Carol, and Ames had found an excuse to leave them and seek out Blair who was at work on the first edition of the *Press*. He was sitting behind a defaced little walnut desk, a green shade over his eyes, his white shirt-sleeves casting strange shadows on the wall.

"Back again? Tough luck," he greeted him laconically. "Everybody's relieved that you resigned—saves me no end of trouble. No more nose for news than Cromwell had for cabarets! I don't want to talk to you—was out two weeks with a bad back. I can't cut up like I used to do—going to the South Sea islands before I have many more birthdays—hi, boy—hang that on the hook——"

"They've forbidden us smoking," he went on lightly as Ames drew a chair to the telegraph desk. "Getting so damned good that they'll cut out printing the racing charts. No advertisements taken for burlesque shows or boxing matches . . . a fat chance for circulation, eh? So you decided to give the paper the small end of it. The Big Boss took it as another good joke on me; says I always pick lemons, but he has usually had a chance to squeeze them. What's new? Going to marry Telva, I hear. God, you're a coward . . . a handsome coward peeping out from behind his mother's skirts."

"I can't talk when you're like this." Ames stared out the dirty windows into the dirtier street where the third floor of a commercial hotel and the maneuvers

of a man working on the fire escape caught his eye. "I'm all out of tune."

"Does a West Indies cruise do that? Doing western New York at thirty-five a week, living in a third-rate rooming-house and losing at poker to mortify the flesh keeps a man more fit. You sleek coward, how did they get you to say Yes?" His harsh laugh seemed to shatter into tiny bits of sound and pierce the air after he had finished speaking.

"Come, 'fess-up; you've decided to be respectable and married, so you'll marry mama's choice. Telva will go far—if you pay for the gasoline. How could you do it after six weeks in the north? There was a girl up there, wasn't there, or was it the old princess who had suffered? You've never dared to suffer—you silk-lined darling," with another harsh laugh.

"I wonder why I let you talk to me like this," Ames asked, picking up a pencil to draw nervous scrolls on a piece of copy paper. "I would let no one else in the world——"

"No one else in the world would bother," supplemented Blair, beginning to get busy as the wire began to click. "Go away and come back some night after the last edition and we'll battle it out. We'll have ale and hard words and you'll wish you'd had spunk enough to stay in the woods until spring without any money to pay your board . . . you'd have had to earn your salt pork and tea by wood chopping. It'd have been a lot jollier than being toted off to the West Indies and made to say 'will you' because mama said 'won't you.'" Waving him aside Blair had devoted himself to his work. Indignant and not at all convinced by any of it, Ames left the office, nodding curtly to one

or two former colleagues and ignoring the office boy's exaggerated sigh of admiration directed at Ames's correct afternoon dress.

Outside he lingered in the doorway, glancing up and down the dusky, muddy street. What he wanted was to see Carol. Probably she was wondering why he had not come to her when Telva had let it be known that he was at home. What a wilful, sincere line of action was hers—how few could understand. Stanley had been a brick about it, but Stanley had already gained her great point! He was engaged to the girl she had selected. Stanley could afford to be magnanimous—Blair might understand. He had meant to tell Blair more about it, confess this unrest, these half-formed ambitions. He wanted to attempt self-justification at having yielded to his mother from a combination of reasons: he had been the means of losing her a sum of money, he had worried her by his absence in a strange part of the country, she was ill and aging, his devotion to her was part of his very being. Looking back he could not recall a time when he had not bowed in semi-deification. More than all else was the feeling within those inner fastnesses of the soul where no one is ever admitted that he was unworthy of Carol's love; he could not true up to it. He lacked concentration, achievement—what had he to show for his twenty-six years? Nothing but many holidays most of which his mother had shared and even more bills which she had paid, his whimsical hobbies, his periods of dissipation, nights when he went unsteadily upstairs and days when the sun was high overhead before he drank his coffee. He wasn't quite the thing, to put it briefly. He lacked the essential something to make him carve out his own

destiny. Carol would demand continuity of existence and applied effort. She would prove as relentless a task-mistress as she would be a sincere wife. She was un-spoiled, well schooled in the ability to make much out of little. Whomsoever she loved she would love with a passionate but disciplining emotion. One would not dare to disappoint her. It would be like cheating a child, a child with a siren's charms and the gift of second sight. Perhaps this subterranean unrest had more or less actuated his acceptance of his mother's wishes—like the movements of an iceberg are determined by the bulk hidden under the water.

Remaining in the doorway as dusk blackened into night, he continued this line of thought. Telva let down any barriers of what might be expected of him; she seemed unconscious of his undefined weakness. Nothing bothered Telva as long as she had the right of way. An exhibitionist, she reveled in selling illicit liquor, never failing to remind one that while she was an opportunist she was none the less the daughter of proud Creoles. Telva's best applied weapon was ridicule—her next was Scotch! Stanley's was tears—a deadly outlay for an addled young man.

Not that he actually disliked Telva. Occasionally she did admirable things, expounded common-sense philosophy which almost amounted to wisdom. She was an excellent sport during a crisis. If one missed a train or was caught in a storm with a punctured tire or wanted to make a complete change of schedule, she never ragged. She had pertinent opinions regarding the topics of the day—sometimes they sounded borrowed from the comment of the leading journalists, but she paraphrased them cleverly. She was a graceful dancer,

a star tennis player and a crack hand at bridge. She was an adept at old-fashioned clog dancing and playing the saxophone. She was "up" on the theory of the ductless glands—she was willing to take the unpleasant character parts in the Town Players' productions and made her own finery, calling everyone's attention to the economy of her handiwork. She was not a bad nurse for she never lost her head and could drive a four-in-hand or an eight-cylinder car or fly a biplane with equal ease.

"She does one credit," Stanley had urged on the voyage out. "A gentlewoman whose wild fling is the same as the girls' who scandalized their families by living in social settlements or working in canning factories to investigate conditions. Think what sons a girl of Telva's spirit could have; what a wise mother for daughters—no sentimental pretense. Ames dear, I'm not urging you to marry someone for whom you don't care—never that. But I cannot help thinking that sometimes if we elders prophesy as to the future it does no harm. Of course there must be love—but does not an infatuation blind one to what might become an ever deepening emotion? To me there is something both sweet and satisfying in having Tony Monroe's girl in my life," and she had left the subject in the vague state of not saying whether or not she regretted the inability to have harried Tony Monroe and borne him a daughter.

Telva would always make certain things easy for him, Ames thought with aimless amusement as he hailed a passing taxi and drove to the Hotel Lenox in spite of his intention to go home. Something or other was going on at the house at which he ought to appear,

an evening of being welcomed back by neighbors and a long-haired poet who was to read his things.

Well, he would look in in time for that—but first a half-hour with Carol and dinner at the club, a glance through the papers and a telephone to Sam Russell who wanted a business conference. He dreaded this last—stiff-necked, square-minded and -headed Sam whose boast was that he had never lost his clients a cent *versus* Ames whose last venture had dropped a hundred thousand after the fashion of ships reported “sunk without a trace.” Already he was prepared to be toplofty and patronizing towards Sam as a backfire defense against Sam’s attitude. As he pictured the interview, in which he was to tell Sam in forceful manner that he was done with finance and about to turn to a profession, he laughed at his conceited phantasy. Decent, grubbing old Sam—what right had he to be other than humble and acquiescent?

He discovered Carol in the hotel dining-room. She was eating without enthusiasm from several dishes like small bird baths in which the advertised thirty-one different foods of the table d’hôte dinner were served. A deaf, red-nosed little man, a permanent guest with an annuity and an old cocker spaniel, was passing her condiment after condiment and shouting vigorously their merits as aids to digestion.

She managed to make him understand that she was not keen on such discoveries, that she was not going to wait for the three kinds of dessert and the demi-tasse which were to follow.

Passing into the stuffy plush parlor at the right, the elevator boy unwillingly removed himself from a

wobbly settee so that Carol was free to hear Ames speak.

She wore a shabby blue serge frock cut square at the neck very like the one he had last remembered her wearing. The braids of red-gold hair gave her face a pale, thin look accentuating the lilac shadows under her eyes.

"Tell me about it," he said.

"I am most impulsive," she began—there was an awkward pause.

Their meeting in this funny little parlor was somewhat like an eloquent pantomime occurring between persons whose happiness to see each other cannot be expressed by words.

"Was it very terrible? Perhaps you would rather not tell me just now?"

"It was so bleak and unbearable afterwards—I ran away from myself, and came here. He must have had a stroke. When we found him he gasped out about a red haze that prevented his seeing. It was over within a few hours."

"And you were alone," regretted Ames, his hand reaching out to stroke her arm.

"Valja had gone off in a gust of temperament and extravagance. The Robertsons were kind; so were some of the others. But I could not stay on to be pitied. I would have turned morbid—I'm a bit morbid now to discover how weak and dependent I am. Grief crashes through one's most bravely voiced theories. I wanted people, hotels, noise, routine work; I wanted to hear strangers talk of impersonal things, to have something to do or to watch or to listen to all the time I was

awake and to dream about when I slept. So I took you at your word. . . .”

“Only to find me away—and to be left here alone, without anyone to talk to. If I had only known.” He spoke as if to blame himself for not having stayed close at hand. “My mother was wretched—I was still foot-loose and we chose our favorite cruise. You must have had my letters? Yet you wrote me but one curt note.”

“Which was fortunate seeing the turn your affairs have taken,” was her answer. “Of course I learned that you were cruising—and that you were engaged. I came to this hotel because you had mentioned it. It has had enough noise and talking and people to watch—besides, I found work.”

“Carol, if only I’d known—you would have come to my mother’s,” he interposed tenderly. “You lonely, lovely stranger——”

“After to-night promise never to pity me,” she ordered. “For now I can hardly expect you to do otherwise. I admit I must seem absurd. Very different in this setting than at home—with the glamor of Valja and dad—and the woods . . . oh, I’m blaming no one. I’ve nothing to grouse about, as dad used to say,” with a brave toss of her head. “Only when I did what you once begged me to do, I find that you are engaged to be married. Don’t fancy that you must sponsor me—that is understood now and for all time. I’ve come on very well.”

“How did you happen to connect with Sam?”

“Applied at an agency; sorry to be unromantic, but that is the truth. He didn’t know that I knew you until last week. (A nice young provincial—a trifle too

cautious to ever go far.) I've a desk overlooking tree-tops, an hour for lunch and all the mineral spring water I care to drink. The work is interesting—I'm trying to master the stock and bond market, to be on the road to selling securities. Really, I'm very contented."

"Do you despise me?" he asked impulsively.

"Worse; I love you," in the sober tone she had used the morning of their good-bye. "Hopelessly bad taste, is it not? I shall never change if you marry a dozen Telvas and I become a Wall Street wizardette. But that is all that it can mean to either of us—the fact that I care . . . I am determined it shall mean nothing else."

"My dear child," drawing his chair closer. "This is as unfair to yourself as it is perplexing to me. You see, I am engaged to Telva because—"

"Your mother wished it. She must be a wonderful person. I've heard much about your mother and Telva—and you—"

"You're crying." Reaching for her hands Ames forgot the publicity of the parlor.

"I am. In half a moment I shall sniff! You can't help not meaning the things you said in the north woods—that was a different you speaking. One who seldom has a chance to exist! Perhaps it is well that this you marries her; she won't care whether you mean things or not. All you will have to do is to buy things."

"Put on your things and come home with me," as if giving a command. "I want to take you to my mother—"

"As if that would matter either to you or to her. Don't be stupidly chivalrous—be the man you are pledged to be—the man who doesn't really mean

things." As she talked she became more the poised, fearless creature of some untrammelled world and less the shabby girl sitting in a musty hotel parlor. "If you've decided to play the game their way play it without hesitation. Don't try compromises. Oh, I told you when we first met that I was afraid of love—your sort of love."

Ames made himself answer: "Aren't you mistaking a first pleasing friendship for something else? Ask yourself before you be my judge—" All the time he wanted her in his arms to whisper the tendernesses he had whispered that last morning in the woods. All the time he was realizing how much he was involved. His mother and Telva waiting for him: he had told Carol that he loved her, she had taken him at his word and come to Dalefield. She was poor and alone—and beautiful.

"I must take you to my mother," he insisted as if she had not answered. Force of habit caused him to hope that Stanley might know what to do and say. At any event he wanted her to know Carol, to prove to Carol that he had meant something of what he had said.

Carol consented because: "I'm not afraid to go," she offered in a spirit of challenge.

"Afraid? Of course not, dearest," the word was spoken naturally before he thought. "You will love my mother. We are not going to let things go bad for you; we'll have you listening to another sort of 'people and noises' than you have here."

"But I'm not coming with you in hope that—I am coming because I'm not afraid," the slightest emphasis on the personal pronoun.

Wrapped in her plaid cape, she accepted Ames's arm. The lateness of the hour prevented any further consideration as to clothes. Nor did it occur to her until she entered Stanley's living-room, a crackling fire furnishing most of the soft light.

Looking down she saw Ames's mother only to realize the awkwardness of herself as well as of the situation. She became a tongue-tied stranger who kept staring at this fascinating little woman in robin's-egg-blue silk with a girdle of pink satin roses for all the world like a schoolgirl's party frock.

"So this is Carol?" Stanley said simply, holding out both hands in greeting. (Tante had often observed that if Stanley was particularly on the defensive she offered both hands.) "Ames had talked of you without pause. My dear, have you bewitched him? We feared lest he return to be a woodchopper. How lovely that you have come to town. I'm so sorry about what has happened. . . . Sit here," leading her to a chair. "I can understand. My adored father died when I was sixteen—it broke my heart. Even yet there are days—" gazing off at the fire effectively. "But we are going to make you forget. How nice of you to come to see me—*right away*. We've not unpacked yet but we've been flung into a neighborhood party, a poet included—are you intrigued? Ah, here you are, Telva; come and admire the Carol-bird. . . . Ames had sense enough to bring her straight to me!"

Stanley's lips closed into a firm, thin line as Telva, all gardenias and black lace apparently bearing a crop of red ostrich tips here and there, inspected Carol with mock gravity.

"I shall padlock Ames from now on," she announced

cheerily; "have a Martini? Then I'll have two—I must do something to sublimate my hatred and terror; at present, my feelings toward you are something it would take a Nihilist committee to define."

"Don't tease, Telva, you may have a surprise or so yourself," interrupted Ames.

"I'm glad that you brought her straight to me," Stanley stroking Carol's arm as if she were a newly acquired possession.

Swords shone in Stanley's eyes. Another goal was in sight—to destroy Carol and all that Carol might attempt to correct or create!

CHAPTER XXI

BEFORE midsummer it was clear that Carol refused to be socially exploited. Consistently she clung to the mediocre privileges attached to being a stenographer in the Samuel J. Russell Investment House.

Stanley was impressed as well as amused. This girl of Ames's, as she impatiently thought of her, was a puzzling combination of unsophistication and age-old wisdom. One did not know how to bring her to her knees. Possessions meant nothing since she had witnessed the havoc they too often created. She was supercilious towards modern society, possibly feeling the weight of her four-and-twenty summers. She might have said to the curious younger set: "You must arrive at my mental attitude sooner or later, only you will be superannuated and eating bran for breakfast before you admit that I am right. I have reached it while possessing the vigor of youth. Why should I come and play?"

Carol's aptitude was for something besides her present work although it was no outstanding talent that demanded expression. Telva might have such a talent, but Carol's ability to interpret alarmed Stanley. It was the faculty to appreciate to the utmost what someone else did, to hold them to their best while doing it.

"You're such an oddity," Stanley told her upon more than one occasion. "I don't want you to grow round-shouldered and wear sensible shoes. Let me discover more of you. What future is there in business unless you marry your employer?" watching for Carol's reaction.

"I've other plans—but you would not approve," would be her answer. "I'm content—for now."

The last phrase caught Stanley's attention. "Then these plans may change everything?" looking with clear but unfriendly eyes into Carol's face.

"Who of us has no plans?" was the unfailing retort, and Stanley would either change the subject or leave Carol alone.

At first she had watched Ames with a jealous, speculative eye equal to Telva's. There was the unpleasant possibility that this person's appearance in Dalefield would terminate in a romantic elopement and Stanley's living in martyrdom ever after while Telva might take to writing "heart murmurs" for confessional magazines.

"Be nice to her, *mia*," Ames urged, coming in one afternoon to find his mother working over her postage stamp collection. "Carol is shy. You never fail with anyone." He began picking stamp hinges apart as if to help but really to conceal agitation.

Stanley knew that something must have happened. "Of course I shall be nice to her—if she permits me," she qualified. "Carol is an odd little thought. So far she has been an iceberg—perhaps not to you. Ames dear, how nice do *you* intend to be? There is—Telva," stopping to sip a cup of tea reflectively.

"Telva? Of course," he said slowly.

Stanley knew that he had begun to make contrasts in Carol's favor.

"Telva is proud. She covers up a hurt by flippancy. I think you ought to know that Telva is worried about you. Can you wonder?" with an accusing look.

Ames felt in the wrong without having the least idea of how he had gotten there. "Oh, damn, I suppose it is because of Carol—which is absurd," pretending to examine a recently acquired set of Liberian stamps by the aid of a magnifying glass.

As he did so Stanley started. Ames had a premature look of age that was alarming. Wrinkles were creeping about his eyes and there was a hint of gray in the bright hair.

"Is it altogether absurd, dear boy? The present situation promises to become awkward."

"No situation about it," muttered Ames, still intent upon the Liberian stamps.

With a flash of intuition Stanley decided that she must become poorer of purse and lower in vitality—there was nothing like keeping Ames on tiptoes regarding her future.

"I've about decided to sell the collection," she announced with a sigh.

"Mother!" He looked in dismay at the tables of albums. "How ridiculous—sell my car or some of these gimcracks," waving a hand at the ivories and enamels. "Never the stamps——" with guilt he recalled the canvases he had purchased from Valja at the price she had asked, not the one which she would have been content to take. Carol had been there. In his delirium of freedom, Carol's red-gold head towering over Valja's white one, he had said yes to whatever

was said as if agreeing with some personal remark of this new-found girl.

"We can get rid of the new things," he added after a moment, "but never your stamps. They have always seemed a part of you; father never meant that you—"

"Your father never meant me to do many things which I have had to do," she said sadly, "but no one stands still in this world. If we would keep up with the procession we must be able to pay for the shoe-leather to march in. Oh, it's not so hard to part with them," her hand laid effectively on an album as she spoke. "Whoever buys them will love them, too. They are not a flesh-and-blood part of me as you are. I would do anything to make your future straight ahead and assured—what do old stamps matter? Being rare they will have a ready sale. 'Gimcracks' abound in all corners of the world. No one will question my reasons for selling the stamps; they will say I am growing old and that you have no flair to continue the hobby. I am growing old," thrusting one satin slippered toe from under her violet tea-gown. "Sometimes I feel alarmingly frail—but always young at heart."

"You will never be really old," he protested, the new wrinkles about his eyes becoming more prominent.

"That is because you are a loyal dear. But you would stand alone if you voiced your opinion. Oh, Ames, I could not go on without you." She paused as if to prevent tears.

"But you won't have to," he protested. "Why entertain the faintest idea of such a thing? Did you think Telva was going to drag me off to Tangiers and set up a bazaar for pussycats and turquoises? I'll al-

ways stay with you—always." There was appeal in his voice as if he dreaded to venture away.

It reassured Stanley but she finished with the same sustained pathos. "Then don't fall under the spell of another influence—like Blair's. He has warped your life, oh, but he has; you'll see it some day. Ever since he sent you into the north woods you have been a different boy. I hope I'm not a selfish, exacting mother who must know the very hour you come in at night and what you do with your money and whom you are with and all that sort of thing. I want you to be independent—even of Telva. I'm sure I've tried to have it that way—I, who never knew what independence meant save by necessity." Tears did overcome her at this strategic point.

A moment later she rallied—Ames kneeling by her side.

"I can't stand by and watch the one person I adore—my son—become the prey of odd mentalities—yes, prey—that word is used advisedly. Blair never was normal—now he is an embittered failure. Carol is not normal." She said the last with a degree of caution, ever conscious of the power of sex to assert itself. But Ames was too absorbed in her plea to make an objection. "Let me be more frank about Carol. She is a beautiful girl who has lived under conditions to make her judgment unreliable. She is the sort that would advise doing the reverse of what one was doing merely because she has no sane set of values. What Carol needs is to play. She is too serious and high-minded—and too poor to carry it off." Feeling that she had said quite enough Stanley waited a reply.

Ames was silent, wondering how much to admit.

The memory of Carol's steady eyes made him silent as to her secret. Stanley sensed this reservation.

"I dare say," he finally admitted as if under protest, "I'm the only wild young dog she has ever known. I suppose I flirted with her without realizing that I gave the impression of being——"

"In love," said his mother quickly.

"No—utterly useless. Carol counts me a total failure to date but she has rather tall ambitions for me, ambitions which I don't believe I'm equal to fulfilling. She'd rather I drove piles or fired a steel furnace, anything save what I'm doing. She considers that I am disintegrating in my present state of being. You are right when you say she is severe in judgments because she does not know values."

"And she actually considers you useless?" The cool, green slits of eyes boded no good for Carol. "Due, I presume, to your mother. In other words this presuming young wood nymph with a thirty-dollar-a-week job has magnified the attentions of a bored man who was marooned in her country for a few weeks. She dubs him a failure, a spoiled, only son. I think Carol has overstepped herself." The indignation in Stanley's tone roused Ames to Carol's defense.

"No, no, *mia*. I asked for her advice, her viewpoint. It may be wrong but it is sincere. I confess that sometimes I am bewildered by the present generation. I feel as if I ought to have lived in less elastic times. How shall I explain it except by saying that the only thing I feel that I've accomplished with honors is the art of spending money. Most of these young things," as if he were removed from them, "have their own sort of ideals even if they are bobbed ideals to match the hair.

They accomplish things right or wrong. But I can't match wits with them." It was a confession as well as a regret. "I never seem to have learned their ways except in the matter of play. Perhaps Carol sees this, she who has always worked and never played. Perhaps I had to beg her to say what she thought. At any rate, *mia*, please don't sit in judgment."

"So it is I who have inhibited you, as they express it these days—you've a mother fixation or something of the sort."

Ames raised a protesting hand. "Young things are ruthless when it comes to their elders. I wish you wouldn't take this so personally. I criticized Carol's dad for keeping her to himself and allowing her to be influenced by that erratic Russian. Bless her beautiful, severe little self, she has tried so hard to be steeped with socialism and martyrdom and God knows what—when she does need to discover what an awfully good time she can have."

"*Do you* think that I've harmed you?" The words fairly burst from Stanley's lips, her hand outstretched as if for mercy.

"Of course not; you never harm anyone. How did we drift into such a conversation?" said Ames, with a furious desire to label himself a hopeless ass and go forth into the wilds and remain. This veiled enmity between Carol and Stanley and Carol and Telva and Stanley and Telva was so involved yet vague. There was the bitter scorn on Blair's part, the good-natured contempt for Ames's fling at business . . . and through it all and no matter what, there was always Stanley, his beautiful, helpless little mother whose very life depended upon his smile. What did any of it matter

in comparison with her? Not a jot . . . never could . . . never would. He would see that he never permitted another such a dialogue.

"Are you going to continue being such frank friends with her?" asked Stanley as if the possibility had just occurred to her.

"If she will let me; she's proud in her way. She feels that she has come a cropper drifting here after her father's death. But she intends to go in for finance and be a success."

"Oh," Stanley's lips hardly formed the word. "You mean that when she came here she did not know you were engaged to be married?"

"Not exactly, not at all," he floundered; "how could she have known? We were away; she came here unannounced and merely waited for my return. Oh, I do like her, *mia*; no matter what one can criticize about Carol one is bound to respect her sterling qualities. I'm tremendously interested in finding out what she is going to do and be——"

"She has talent?" asked Stanley with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Hardly—a great sympathy with life, I should say. In spite of her poise there are flashes of something dynamic that make one want to see the something develop into action. Why object to my friendship with Carol? Telva and Sam Russell pal about with shameful abandon," he added in a lighter tone. "I came upon them only yesterday setting out for a dawn bathing party at the lake. Telva with a crimson *maillot* and a flaming orange cape for shelter and Sam looking proud as Punch but a trifle worried nevertheless. What if I objected to that? Telva tells me at regular

intervals that she is not the submerged, wifely sort who looks forward to wedding anniversaries as the great event of the year."

"But Telva is in step with her generation; she is—well, she is Telva and no one is expected to take her too seriously," Stanley argued.

"Isn't she a trifle warped? Think of her audacities. *Mia*, I'm keen to know Telva's mother." He paused as if it were all a part of the thing and he wanted to have done with it. "There was never sympathy between you, was there?"

"No; of course we were—friends," said Stanley guardedly. "I mean surface-wise. You'll find Telva's mother an orthodox, and sallow, person. I can't blame her child for running away. So you intend being friends with Carol?"

"As long as Carol will let me. Say you'll be nice to her. She admires you so." He added this last knowing that it was so obvious a compliment that his mother would not take the pains to dispute it.

He left her after she had promised not to advertise the stamp collection for sale until he had had time to report on what was happening regarding their last investments. He went off in search of Telva whom he had promised to take to Nigger Heaven for dinner. They were to go on to a rehearsal of the next Town Players' production in which Telva had the part of a cockney charwoman. She delighted in such parts, sparing no expense to make herself impossible but dramatically accurate. Ames was to be a superfluous individual with some three monsyllables to utter so that the rest of his time could be devoted to mixing drinks for the remainder of the hardworking cast.

CHAPTER XXII

TELVA was waiting at the hotel.

“My love, there are many ways of attaining an end—Luther preached and Cromwell fought—but Telva opened a bottle of 1879 port. The effect was marvelous and he will play the lead. We were in despair, about to beggar ourselves in sending to New York for someone. The lead is the whole show in this case and the thing might have fallen flat. Old dear, you look fagged. Do you know the latest stunt? To serve the hors-d’oeuvre with an emotional stimulus? I’m on a still hunt to find what they are.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” said Ames somewhat roughly. Occasionally Telva aroused the impulse to be brutal. “What’s this news about the lead and you sacrificing a bottle of 1879 port?”

They were driving to the squalid lake front. Dalefield had sacrificed her choicest district to factory sites and railroads but below the tracks and the great brick buildings where furnaces burned and roared twenty-four hours out of the twenty-four were huddled squatters’ huts, one of which was a recently opened and much frequented eating-house—Nigger Heaven, by name—where one found waffles and chicken, Creole salads and spoon bread, Judge Pommeroy’s pudding of Alabama fame, syrupy black coffee and sugared pecans, imported claret, flaky cheese sticks, cordials.

A colored quartette sang spirituals and plantation melodies and danced in between the numbers. Red-bandannaed waitresses flew about with trays of food or paused to do the Charleston at the request of a table of guests. Adjoining the main room was a long, narrow apartment with a sanded floor and severe refectory tables and benches. Here one could play dominoes or bagatelle or sit and sip crème de menthe or crème de cacao while reading foreign newspapers.

Threading their way through the crowded aisles they found a particular corner and a particular red-bandannaed mulatto waitress who greeted them with a smile composed of two rows of perfect teeth, setting off in quest of chicken gumbo soup without delay.

"Your mother would never come here, would she?" mused Telva ignoring her soup for a cigarette. "She is the lavender-and-old-lace sort that prefers tea and cinnamon toast in the palm-room of a hotel. That makes things rather easy for me. If we were the same sort we'd clash about preferring orange pekoe or Russian blend! As it is we get along rather well," recalling the yards of Point de Venise which Stanley had given her, a pretty and fictitious story accompanying the presentation. More and more Stanley had determined to be the lavender-and-old-lace sort, nothing was more inspiring to chivalry.

"You two java-and-mocha better than you and me," suggested Ames flippantly as he began his soup.

"But that does not matter these days. People do as they like. They need only agree in a mutually conventional background, engraved holiday greetings and an occasional family party. Your mother never had what I considered a bona fide husband—she married a page

out of history; stupid history at that. I wonder if she never had her stray moments . . . from what my bitter mater says she might have had," blowing smoke rings and smiling at him through the fog.

"It isn't our job to pry into that," began Ames.

"Of course not, merely because it is not interesting. I can't become used to the idea that one-half the time you are a prig and the other half—'tight,'" was the caustic summary. "I almost wish I hadn't played quite so hard to get you. Ooof," with upturned eyes, "I thought it hopeless until the hurricane at St. Kitt's . . . see here, my boy, let's understand each other which is much jollier than being romantically crushed and in line for an awakening. It is expedient to marry —oh, but it is: it suits your mother, and I'm tired of being poor. I'll not be as impossible as you may think if I have a decent allowance." Already Telva had cast ahead to the time when she should become Mrs. Van Zile and occupy the smartest apartment in Dalefield or something vivid in New York—with dutiful and frequent visits to the "lovely lady." It was not a terrifying sort of future—whether Ames was a prig or more or less drunk. She had a good-natured, amused sort of affection for him; he never gave her a thrill but he would never cause her to shed a tear.

She wondered as to Ames's reactions. His clumsy efforts at love-making, his conscientious efforts to learn what she thought and wanted and intended doing; it amused her as one is amused by amateur theatricals where one is acquainted with everyone who appears. Underneath this good-natured, amused affection lurked the desire to arouse in Ames what his square-jawed self hinted that he was capable of expressing.

She longed to see him other than the dutiful sentimentalist, to have him fight desperately, even unfairly, for something he wanted to attain, to comfort his defeat or applaud his success . . . there was more or less of the cat in Telva, the cat who plays with its victim before it takes the trouble to kill.

"I don't regard things in just that way," said Ames severely. (He was all prig now!) "I look forward to our home and our children. Those are the paramount things in life." He put out his hand to touch the tip of her nicotine-stained fingers, a sense of unfamiliarity surging over him. It was an unwelcome thought that he was more or less pledged to this strange girl.

He glanced across the room with its hum of junglish music, the sound of shuffling feet, the clash of silver and china, and saw Blair's stooped yet graceful back and his grizzled, slightly too long hair. Blair was absorbed in talking to his companion—a beautiful young person in a modest black hat and a supple, ivory-tinted satin dress. Her blue eyes were looking at Blair with friendly curiosity. It was Carol. Within Ames rose a sudden and unreasonable resentment that he should have so discovered her.

Following his glance, Telva waited for him to make some comment.

Ames half rose as if to go over to them. Thinking better of it he leaned back in his chair.

"I didn't know that Blair ever came here," he said as if in apology.

"And as for Carol——! My dear, the pretty clay toes are not beginning to show but to thrust themselves into dancing pumps. Carol's in danger of becoming a real girl. You superb prig, you wanted to have a sort

of myth connected with her, as if you had found a dryad in the woods and fancied that you could keep her all for yourself."

"You have the weirdest notions——" The negro quartette began an old spiritual. Their voices whined and pleaded with the passionate impossible words. It depressed Ames. He continued to resent Carol's being here with Blair. Blair was still dangerous!

Telva caught his thought. "Fascinating even yet, isn't he?" she asked. "Beware, Ames, or you'll have to be his best man in spite of yourself! Carol is apt to go housekeeping in a three-room flat, have twins and disillusionments and then pull Blair through delirium tremens."

"What an idea! They probably came for a mere lark." Ames could find no more satisfactory reason.

"Um." Telva was more animated than usual. "They have something to talk over—I happen to know that Blair is coaxing Carol to take the part of the model for the Players' thing—you know the rôle? Wouldn't she be ideal? With her hair and eyes——" But Telva's enthusiasm rang a little false.

"What has Blair to do with the Players?" Ames neglected his chicken and waffles.

"He has consented to take the lead—that of an adorable old rake. The tryouts yielded nothing but duds. Blair was the only one who could save us so I flattered and commanded and treated to drinks until he promised—half sheepishly, half eagerly, as it seemed. My dear, that man once had a future on the stage—did you know that he played with Maude Adams in *The Masked Ball*, and with Modjeska? Yet he gave it all up to become a newspaper soak?" with

unflattering truth. "I think it's a little hard to do this part with a bunch of adoring amateurs." She nodded at Carol who had finally looked into that corner of the room, unconsciously attracted by Ames's stares. "Let's get together since they're probably going on to the rehearsal. Isn't Carol delicious? She's both shocked and impressed."

After dinner Telva and Ames invaded Blair's table. There was reproach in Ames's voice as he asked if he might drive them to the rehearsal; Telva had been letting him in on the latest developments.

"Thanks, old man," said Blair crisply. "I don't mind saying it saves carfare." Blair's newly shaven face had a certain youthful glow; his eyes were wistful as he looked at Carol. "I've bullied this young person into being the model in the first act. Think of me, an inky desk man going to step out in the provinces after all these years—"

"Of course, you must say yes," gushed Telva. "The Players is my child; it was born in room 84 of the Hotel Lenox—a good, lusty infant with six charter members for nurses and sponsors. It has grown until we have almost two hundred. Come along, Carol, think how superb you'll feel propped up on a modeling block and draped with the swankest sheets in town."

"Of course you are coming," was all Ames said; Carol did not seem to notice.

It was not until the rehearsal was well under way with Blair directing, acting and sampling the cocktails while Telva and Sam Russell indulged in verbal battles as to the matter of lighting, that Ames managed to draw Carol aside and say imperiously:

"Why didn't you tell me that you knew him—at least well enough to go to that sort of a place for dinner?"

"Why should I?" was Carol's cool reply. "Why didn't you tell me that you were going to be there?"

"But you've refused every invitation I've mustered up the courage to extend. You've been unapproachable to me and to my mother as well; think that quite fair?"

"I've stopped thinking for now. I'm playing this model thing for two reasons—guess them!"

"Because we can see each other more often and because you're the most beautiful model these morons could ever hope to find!"

"Wrong. Because I want to please Blair and because I find that you are right—I'm lonesome. I'd run back to the woods and brood unless I did something like this."

"Why didn't you tell me that you had changed your mind?" In the dark of the studio corner they seemed to be alone. A high-cut window was flung open, letting in the moonlight while candles flickered effectively on the table where a buffet supper was spread. The players had gone into the other room for the tag end of the rehearsal. Blair's voice boomed out in emphatic command or Telva's falsetto laugh interrupted the hum of voices. Then a piano and a saxophone and a ukulele began playing.

Still Carol sat in a carved, high-backed chair looking soberly at Ames's puzzled face.

"You are not frank with me," he complained.

"How could I be?" shrugging her shoulders.

"Do you still want to be?"

The blue eyes were dark with uncertainty. "Why ask such questions?"

"What sort shall I ask? Do you like Blair?"

"Very much. I think I understand him. He's been hurt by someone but he's such a dear that nothing can quite spoil him."

"Perhaps it was a fancied hurt." Ames found himself ashamed as soon as he had spoken.

"Perhaps. Hurts can differ as much as noses. However, I like him. His attempts at being bitter and cynical mean little. Underneath he is as tender and credulous as a child. He counts himself as a lost soul; I suspect that he believes in Santa Claus."

"You seem to know him rather well." Ames spoke with constraint. "When did all of this happen?"

"It began by my eating lunch and he breakfasting at the same unfashionable place. For days we sat vis-à-vis, indifferently passing the salt and sugar. One day he began about the weather. Then it was Dalefield's lack of cosmopolitanism; then it was the woods. All the time it seems that he knew who I was—then I found out who he was—then we talked about you."

"I hope I came in for an occasional kind word."

"Not many; still, Blair is fond of you," she admitted. "Failure that he is, he wants to see you a success."

"Why harp on that theme?" Ames turned irritable. "What is it that I am to do, where am I to go? Surely I have man-sized responsibilities. I am to read law, I have my mother——"

Telva glided over to claim him and prevent Carol's answer. "Your wren wants a flight," she ordered. "I'll send Sam to you, Carol. Try to find out if he insists

upon having the straw-colored lights for the second act. If he does I'm going to turn a searchlight on his conscience." She drifted off in Ames's arms as the saxophone quivered and the drums beat.

Sam Russell came along to say something brief and polite. He brought her some food and then left in pursuit of Telva. Sam had the definite ideas as to social life that all self-made young men are apt to entertain, particularly those who once delivered bundles after school hours and bought their shoes at basement store sales. This good-looking and, to say the least, efficient stenographer of his was a jewel in her place—but her setting was not Betty Lee's studio. He was puzzled as to why the younger set received her as one of them while he was still on probation. Because this girl had been the companion of a maudlin Russian princess and because Ames Van Zile had strayed off into the wilds and stumbled upon her—was she to be invited into the inner circle of young things where Sam yearned to be while he, with a steadily increasing bank account and civic spirit, was whispered about as "that dressmaker's son"? Sam's momentary compensation was taking Telva into his arms for another dance, turning in time to see Blair Britton stop Ames who was on his way back to Carol.

"Nice girl—wish you were worthy of her—hear you are talking of reading law. Bar Harbor for weekends, I suppose . . . bah!"

"Are you in love with her?" Ames retaliated. "Be careful—she is still young enough to believe in things."

"She'll get over it—if she knows you long enough," snapped Blair passing on to his hostess.

Rejoining Carol, Ames found her surrounded by new friends. They were curious as to Valja; Carol's connection with the latter lent a glamor; then, too, there was Carol's father. His story suggested the sort of tragedy they voted "too perfect" and "I can't bear it, my dear—I'm so thrilled." Wouldn't she tell them about Valja? Did she truly drink vodka and have pet snakes in red lacquer boxes? How beautifully burnished was Carol's hair and how quaint her old-fashioned frock—she could speak Russian? Simply marvelous! They were sold on having her become one of them—absolutely!

CHAPTER XXIII

BY MIDNIGHT Ames drove Blair and Telva and Carol to the little red jewel-box where Stanley was waiting. It was a hazy, sultry night and they lingered by the garden pool to sip iced drinks as the stars faded.

Stanley betrayed no surprise when Blair was introduced as the "savior of the Town Players," the "angel-duck who would carry the day," nor did she show anything but enthusiasm when Carol was announced as the model for the first act. Telva had flung her thin, bare-armed self down on the grass, waiting for Stanley to take up the burden of conversation.

"Why didn't you ask me to join the cast?" Stanley said demurely.

"Why, *mia*—would you?" began Ames.

"Once I was Cinderella and danced ballet numbers and wore tulle frosted with rhinestones. My encores compensated for the tightness of my slippers. I was to have gone to London. . . . That must have been about the time your father was coming away, wasn't it, Carol?"

"Of course you were a darling," said Telva before Carol could answer. "We may make a sudden demand for our next attempt. You'd be ideal in the right part, only—"

"I'm too old to do *ingénues* and too small to do

dowagers; isn't that it? Good enough. I'm content to buy tickets and lend things. I feel *very* much better now that you are one of them, Carol," but all the time she was looking at Blair. He was regarding the pool as if there were neither garden nor iced drinks nor volatile young things at hand.

After the young things went indoors to pick up something on the radio, Blair's head turned to regard Stanley. Without preliminaries he began:

"Time flies; we are almost too old to do any more mischief."

Stanley made a deprecatory gesture.

"That girl is the right sort—meaning Carol," Blair added. "Why not take Telva out of the combination?"

"You must suffer from hallucinations." Stanley broke a flower into useless bits and dropped them slowly into the pool. "Under the stimulus of drink you are even bitter toward me—"

"Bitter? Good God, if these flippant young things knew, even the ruthless Telva, they would not attempt to outdistance your feats. If I realize that my life is shot, you won't admit that yours is lived. You are still scheming, dominating, warping. You want to keep the boy in his cradle; you disguise it in the form of an eight-cylinder car."

"That is pathetic impudence," speaking in the slow, cold voice she had sometimes used when speaking to Van Zile. "You are as amusing as you are absurd. I should take a man who picked my pocket more seriously."

"Stop pretending," he demanded. "I'll submit being shown the door but not your parlor tricks. Everyone has a 'comeupment'—picture your own. Have you

realized that you have glided through life pretty much as you liked, using everyone, laughing at them, steam-rolling the entire outfit so to speak? Wait, hear me out. When you broke my heart, for lack of better words, you made a thorough job of it. Nothing else has ever hurt in the same way. When Donna died,"—the blue haze hid the harsh lines in his face but somehow Stanley knew that they were there—"that grief left me numb, hating myself, but not suffering. I blamed myself because I could not suffer. Now I see that you exhausted the ability. I believed in you as she believed in you and gave me up to you. Your husband must have believed in you, God help him; so did this man Monroe that one still hears a word about. So does Ames. . . ."

"I shall hear you out," Stanley said suddenly, "because I wish to answer you once and for all. Then we are through."

Vehemently he blundered on that she was walking roughshod over her son even as she had walked roughshod over her own generation, this talented boy who could go far with the right person by his side. The difference in years and in relationship gave Stanley the whip-hand even as it deprived Ames of the power of comprehension. What Ames needed was not so much an inspiration as a catalyst. Here he paused, sinking back on the bench with the air of one who has made a great but futile effort.

"A catalyst?" repeated Stanley lightly. "What new notion is this?"

"In chemistry one sometimes places a foreign material in the mixing vessel, a material unneeded to the formula but the presence of which starts a reaction

although the foreign substance itself remains unchanged. It neither diminishes nor increases but serves to set in motion the essential elements. Carol's is such a nature; hers is the ability to make one express the best within him without that abject sacrifice of self or the parasitical influence which blights. Ames needs just such a someone. All of his life he has had your cloying self directing what he was to do and say and be. He has not given you loyalty but blind devotion. You crave endlessness, Stanley, not eternity. You flinch from conclusions. But age will soon stand in your way —then what? It is around the corner from us both," Blair added thoughtfully. "Here we sit, after the stress of noonday, I with an ancient festering wrong and you on the defensive lest I save someone whom you are crushing so exquisitely. . . . You hold me in contempt: I am everything which spells failure in your eyes. You don't fancy for a moment that I could become formidable . . . well, I agree with you. I can only plead that the boy go free and the girl go with him. Once I begged you to think of my love for you; now I ask for your son——"

The silence was broken by the sounds of an old-time waltz and a jubilant cry from the young people that it was Oakland "coming in as clear as a bell!"

The tinkly music-box tune—"Invitation to the Waltz," no less—brought to these middle-aged enemies the sentimental memories which are so easily experienced in a moonlit garden. Stanley's terrier nuzzled Blair's hand as if to plead for her.

Blair's thoughts became remote, useless. He recalled Stanley standing in Mary Dealey's parlor that late Sunday afternoon, suggesting a miniature edition of

the Empress Eugénie . . . after all, nothing else had mattered from that moment. Such hopeless, eager love was more a form of madness, obscuring one's judgment and sense of justice, leaving one as if a fever had run its course, unable to muster one's forces and begin again. No wonder the rest of the world regarded it as a pitiful delirium . . . Donna. . . . He had crawled back to take from Donna everything which he had been so eager to give Stanley . . . her strength, her sympathy, her love—her life. There was no excuse for him, no matter whether he thought of himself as frenzied as if under the influence of a drug or whether Donna herself had said that she was content with crumbs. There was no excuse—and from such a fate must he save this boy! After more than a quarter of a century he was a penniless newspaperman, Donna was dead and Stanley a lovely woman still undefeated! There came both the desire to strike her down and to clasp her in his arms, to weep for Donna and for that dead Blair of his youth, forgetful of young Ames and Carol and all that he hoped life might bring to them. . . .

Stanley's thoughts were more diversified. She was wondering how to be amicably rid of Blair. How well he had stood the stress of the years. She contrasted the careful diet Van Zile had followed, the cabinet baths, the morning exercises, that tedious, safe routine which had not saved him. She admired recklessness because she was as cautious as she was scheming. She pitied those who laid their cards on the table and allowed the opponent the privilege of using them to play back against . . . The admirable abandon which Blair had betrayed proved the depth of the early hurt.

She decided that age rather became him. Had Donna lived age would have found her to be heavily statuesque, of the bovine variety. With his keen sense of the beautiful, Blair would have been the first to descry the fact. Then she found herself thinking of tomorrow's dinner menu and that she needed peacock-green sewing silk to put in a skirt hem—also three hundred dollars for the coming week if they motored to Lenox. If Telva would buy a certain tangerine-colored velvet she would give her a necklace of square-cut emeralds. Was Ames really in love with Carol? What constituted that tall creature's charm? Why did she *almost* make Stanley feel ill at ease—a penniless stenographer whose mother had been a barmaid? Even Blair had taken up cudgels in her behalf. She must see Tante before they began their motor trip—there was some tedious arranging of duplicate stamps which the older woman ought to do, since she had secured Tante a room on the top floor of an old mansion now gone the way of many old mansions—subdivided into apartments with massive woodwork and stained glass windows as compensation for the lack of elevators. So Ames wanted to read law . . . Well, let her have a good sleep and she would have everyone's future well in hand.

"What are you thinking?" Blair interrupted.

Recollecting herself, Stanley answered solemnly, "Do you know that I once tried to die?" pausing for her words to take effect.

Blair chuckled. "I never thought you'd be commonplace."

"I regarded suicide as a way out," still striving for an effect, "an open door if I chose to exit. When I failed and was dragged back to life I felt the door was

shut and the key thrown away. So I went on . . . oh, you don't understand, do you? You have never realized that I'm complex, all things both good and bad while yours is a single-track mind. When you cared for me, part of me cared for you. The other part fought against it, cheated, raged, and insisted that the matter end. I could not unify myself, Blair—that was why I ran away. At last you have the truth. I sympathized with your love, humored it, tried to win the other part of me over to your cause—oh, but you must listen. I am not posing when I tell you that I have never been more wretched than when I let myself realize that someone loved me better than their life. I knew in advance that they would realize I was not theirs in entirety and their reaction would be unfair recriminations. I believe that I was born to be a mother but never a wife," leaning forward to rest a persuasive hand on Blair's arm. "Only in that relationship have I found contentment."

"When did you attempt this dramatic exit from life?" asked Blair in a matter-of-fact voice.

"Just after I married Lee. You were out of my life but I sensed your bitterness. I began to vision the years slowly rising before me in a ponderous pile—some unexpected day they would crash down and extinguish me without warning. No one knew when I tried to slip out of the door—not even Tante—and Tante understands better than most." Stanley's eyes strained in the haze to see Blair's expression.

The Oakland station had finished its programme and the young people were returning. A debate about seeing Carol and Telva home resulted in Ames's driving all to their destinations and coming back at a

thoroughly disreputable hour to find his mother still beside the pool.

"*Mia*," he began in alarm, "did you fall asleep and waken when I drove in?"

"No," holding up her face for a kiss.

"Why this morning vigil?"

"I wanted to think," she confided seriously, ignoring the fact that Ames had been drinking. "It was about you and your friend Blair. He tells me what a parasite I am, that you must go far away and take someone along with you who is as independent and beautiful as Carol. You'd probably build a cabin and start raising crops and killing queer snakes; yes, drastic as all that." The dawn showed a weariness in her face which was impressive.

"Blair's an impudent grouch," Ames excused, sitting beside her, "his favorite indoor and outdoor sport is interfering in other people's affairs."

"You have just left him?" she asked anxiously.

"No—we took him home and then went round to see Sam Russell who was trying to have an after-rehearsal party and failing utterly. Telva made it a success and was then content to leave," with a reminiscent chuckle. "Poor kid, she tells me her mother arrives at noon and jolly little rest will she have."

Stanley's figure became a trifle more rigid.

"Why the visit?"

"Her mother has joined the ranks of psychic phenomena. Has séances and is considered a crack medium, Telva's father sends all sorts of messages, denouncing you and my marriage to Telva. Mrs. Monroe will arrive with a brief-case of automatic writings to coax Telva home."

"It will be so interesting to watch Lucille," murmured Stanley.

"Won't it? She's set to make a complete hash of the Van Ziles. Telva has mapped out her campaign."

"Did you take Carol home before Blair?" interrupted Stanley.

Ames started. "Um; had to be up early, you see. This kind of thing is new to her."

"Do you think that Blair is in love with her?" was Stanley's next move.

Ames's eyebrows were a disapproving, straight line. "Impudent old dog—he better not."

"Would it matter to you?" Stanley pursued.

"Naturally. Who wants to see a fine girl like Carol—and she is superb—throw herself away on a remnant like Blair, matrimonially speaking? I value the old chap and all that but when it comes to marrying Carol, thumbs down." Drink had loosened Ames's tongue.

"I doubt if there is any chance of it," Stanley comforted, leaning her head against Ames's shoulder. "You dear, blind boy—the girl loves *you!*"

Ames began smoking rapidly, his heels digging little muddy trenches in the tender grass.

"But you already know that," added his mother. "Poor Carol! Marry Telva soon and get to reading law—drifting is deadly. Tell me that I have not limited or warped you."

"Not exactly," turning halfway on the bench to face his mother. "For a long time, ever since I—well, for some time I've felt as if I had frittered away time and brains as well as money. We are all egotists at heart, aren't we? For I believe that my brains and time ought to be equal to any man's money. I loathe

the business of investments and mortgages, having title deeds examined, the petty litigation that handling our affairs necessitates. I would choose something human and with a thrill—that is why I fell in with the idea of newspaper reporting, each day brought something different, unexpected. I liked the drama, the working under pressure. Perhaps I've never let you see that side of me. But I want to do the things which bring me into contact with people, working with and for them——” pausing lest he finish what was now uppermost in his mind: that his mother had educated him far more thoroughly than had any tutors or professors—that she had educated him for the sole career of being her son. From the earliest days he remembered planning for their seeing the Old World together, later on to beautify their particular corner of the New one. There had been vague prophecies that he was to become a great man, a very great man—with nothing tangible or compelling about his part in bringing this to pass. He had matured considering greatness to be his heritage—because he was Stanley Van Zile's child. While he thought this Stanley was fighting against the impulse to send Ames away and the desire to keep him under her own roof. She was angered at her weakness, amazed that she had become warped. She had often sent him away for intervals, but they were different; he had then not yet met Carol —nor Blair. No, he must stay beside her; she needed him, she deserved to have him! Blair had been cruel when he hinted that old age would soon stand in the trail.

“Has Carol suggested that you read law?” she asked.

Ames hesitated. "No—she does not know me well enough," he said with a sense of guilt because he knew that it would please his mother although he realized that Carol knew him better than anyone else in the world.

"She wants me to do my best—as you do. You see," he added, "at the university I graduated with several wornout pairs of dancing pumps and a good-looking frat pin. That was about all! When I start to read law—I may find myself mentally out of alignment—I'll have to learn to concentrate and persevere——"

"What a notion! Your grandfather was one of the most brilliant men of his profession. He would have gone far if—if his wife had not died," she finished quickly. "I'm relieved to know it is to be law instead of Arctic explorations or borax extraction from Death Valley. Ames darling, we've been stupids not to have realized your trend of mind and set you to work at it long ago."

"I don't want to become a corporation lawyer, the canny, quiet sort that keeps big business men out of court. I want to fight for the case that I believe in. When I reach the port-wine-and-beware-of-drafts-stage I want to weave into fiction some of the stories that I've seen lived. I want to enter Columbia this year. When I picture all it could mean I'm impatient to begin."

"Your marriage to Telva?" reminded Stanley.

"We can wait a year or so and see how the gods favor it," with a forced optimism. "Telva won't mind; if she does we can marry and go along modestly on what I have. I don't want you to give me anything

more; I want to earn from now on. I've cost you too much by being an impractical young ass——”

Stanley winced as if from an actual blow. She was acknowledging a defeat. She longed to be the inspiration which she knew that Carol had become.

“I'll come down and take a studio apartment—you must be comfortable. I can run back and forth so that you will have bachelor hall most of the time. When you marry Telva——” Telva still seemed an inevitable conclusion. Ames's sense of obligation must not be weakened by allowing any alternative.

“I shall be all right alone.” Ames squared off his shoulders as if expressive of his mental decision. “No more from you, *mia*, guard what you have—use it as you like. I've sowed enough wild oats to make me rather sure of being steadied from now on. That's one consolation.”

“You have Telva—an unusual, adoring girl,” ignoring all else.

“Sometimes I'm afraid to go ahead with Telva.” He sat down again on the bench from which he had just risen in a decision to get to bed.

“Perhaps I've been pretending. I think Telva would be honest enough to admit the same. We might marry only to discover there was a new sort of love, stronger, finer, more exacting. Telva's version of the grand passion seems nothing but a modern flirtation—with substantial gifts. It would be hideous to marry, only to be disillusioned.” All the while he was seeing Carol as if she were standing behind Stanley and audaciously shaking her head each time Stanley nodded or nodding whenever Stanley's lips formed a negative. “You can't

tell what law school and a reduced income may do to me. Retrenching and plugging for a definite purpose does not leave much time for nonsense. Come to New York and get me settled if you like but let me be alone most of the time. You—you spoil me—and I love you so." His reluctance made Stanley applaud the effort which his sincerity had cost.

"Very well," she said in a quiet way as if there was nothing more to be said. "About Telva—you have never appreciated her. I am willing to give you up to her."

"Telva can never take your place. A man should not feel that way about his wife. She ought to crowd his mother for place, as they say. Telva never has. You are so much lovelier and more talented and worthwhile, if you want to know, that Telva seems crude by contrast. She is all abrupt, meaningless angles—apt to become a bore after you have danced with her twice in succession. I think of my future as being one-tenth with Telva and nine-tenths with you!"

Stanley's face betrayed proper concern. "I always want my own corner of your heart no matter whom you marry," she whispered, "but you take an exaggerated view of the thing."

"Then here is an end of argument," offering his arm as they went into the house.

At sunrise Stanley was still awake, wondering as to Carol's technique and blaming herself for having failed to become her confidante.

CHAPTER XXIV

BEFORE Ames left for Columbia in the early fall, Dalefield had new and interesting matters for speculation. By what stroke of genius—for the older set called it by no other name—had Stanley Van Zile been able to entertain Lucille Monroe as a house guest? Ostensibly Telva had no facilities for entertaining her mother at close range; it was open gossip that they were non-compatible. As Telva's future mother-in-law probably Stanley was merely doing the gracious thing. Certain matrons, among them the snubbed connections of the late Van Zile, persisted in whispers which caused eyebrows to be uplifted. Tony Monroe had died in a madhouse. To the last he had mistaken everyone for Stanley. He had expected to divorce his wife and marry her. Before Van Zile's death he was an unconventional caller at the red brick mansion. He drove with Mrs. Van Zile, danced and skated with her, sketched her, designed her costumes, wrote her daily despite their visits, made love to her before his wife's face and behind her husband's back.

Someone had once asked Stanley what would happen should her husband detect her in an intrigue—putting the case in imaginary terms as if such a possibility was as remote as it was interesting.

“He would slap me and kill him,” Stanley had re-

torted gaily—and the presuming questioner now remembered and repeated the incident with gusto.

Stanley had given a number of small affairs for her guest. But old acquaintances found it impossible to have Lucille Monroe to themselves. This severe, sal-low woman looking half again her age seemed ill at ease with everyone. She had neuralgia and insomnia; she was absorbed in her séances; she had neither time nor tolerance for those who were not. There was nothing to be said about her daughter's engagement. In brief, she proved a fretful gentlewoman who knew that she was being cheated but was unable to remedy the matter. Stanley having cheated her long ago, her own daughter was turning traitor. Only the automatic writings purporting to be from her father and husband furnished consolation. All would be rectified on the next plane; she had so nearly ended existence on this one that it was hardly worth the effort to assert herself.

"Tante dear," confessed Stanley the third day after Lucille was her guest, "I'm a fortunate person. In my heart of hearts I have a guilty conscience about—Lucille. But it would never do to let her suspect. I admit nothing."

"Not even to yourself?" cried Tante gruffly, tapping her cane on the floor as if to call the world's attention to the fact. "Poor soul, let her alone; she has found her own brand of comfort."

"Oh, I shall. It is merciful that she thinks Tony waits for her, an appreciated, purged Tony with a hatred of me! Also it is fortunate that Telva regards the thing as a 'whale of a joke.' "

Stanley was visiting Tante in the turret-apartment. Stanley had come to Tante as she always did when

things pressed too heavily upon her. It was a relief to say, "I have a guilty conscience" or drop a hint as to her schemes.

"I'll bring her calling tomorrow," she said somewhat apologetically. "Wear your lavender robe and have your hair fluffed. You could be so much nicer if you would."

"I expect you'll give me one of these new-fangled permanent waves before you put my old bones in the coffin," said Tante grimly. "That would be you, Stanley—to look your best in order to do your worst!"

The words jarred. It was one thing tentatively to admit guilt and another for a dependent to dare to call one's hand.

"You have never understood the real me," she said petulantly. "You did your best but it was a disappointed spinster's best. If that hurts, I'm sorry. Surely you can understand about Tony—you who loved my father. Did you think I never knew—when you slaved for us, jeopardizing your reputation of the severe seventies? Probably you thought the risk of scandal was worth it. Once I hid and heard you tell father so. You said, 'I'd dare to do anything if it was to help *you*.' Perhaps I felt something the same way about Tony. I was a lonesome child-wife. Wonderful as Lee was he was impossible. I had had a ghastly experience with that infatuated actor—is it to be wondered at that I turned to Tony as an older man of the world, clever, lonesome—all the rest of the fascinating things that an unhappy young matron delights in? Besides, we must not live in the past." She was in tears by this time, the shining drops lay appealingly on her pale cheeks. "It won't be long before I'll be wearing laven-

der robes and tapping with my cane—then what will any of it matter? Any of it but Ames!"

An ominous gray film had spread over Tante's eyes during the last year but she could still regard one quizzically.

"Always," she echoed ironically. Stanley took a hurried leave.

Approaching eighty and practically penniless, Tante still had the ability to make one feel ill at ease. So consistently had she lived and spoken the truth that it was a habit which age and poverty could not set aside.

"A wise old thing," appraised Stanley begrudgingly as she went out to her electric cab. She chose an electric because it suited the rôle she played—but she was capable of driving any car. This repressed ability to do the rugged, even brutal tasks clamored for expression. This appealing personality had been designed to keep Ames under her rule—how could he displease a frail little mother of shrinking purse and lacy tea-gowns? All for Ames—but was he worth it? It was disconcerting to find herself thinking this as she rolled swiftly down the avenue. Sometimes she was in danger of becoming bored with the mother rôle as she had been with that of the child-wife and Blair's fiancée, perhaps even being her father's darling, had she been able to remember. Having others do what she wished them to do was monotonous. She liked a chase, a race, a gamble, a hazard. She might have competed with men in a career, she could have faced unpleasant realities, dealt with abnormalities, juggling and scheming and bullying anyone who crossed her path. Had she Carol's youth—and complexion, she thought as she turned down a side street which led into the busi-

ness section, she would waste scant time over a typewriter nor with Ames's timid lovemaking. As if Ames had deceived her for a moment; as if she did not know his bewildered romanticisms. There was something of a sneer on her face as she thought of her son impersonally. Four years at law school—much could happen in that time. In all probability he would marry Telva within the year and become as conscientious regarding her as he would be pathetically confidential to his mother. What a terrible fate if she found herself bored with Ames! Was she to acknowledge that this rôle of hers had been played so faithfully as to terminate in becoming tedious? Never! She thought again of Carol's red-gold hair and satiny, ivory-tinted skin. Vainly and vaguely she wished that she might coax the hour glass back twenty-five years. . . .

She stopped at Sam Russell's office regarding an investment matter of which Ames knew nothing, Sam a little and Stanley almost everything. Mr. Russell was out of town; would she speak with Miss Clive, who was his assistant these days and no longer his secretary?

Her curiosity piqued, Stanley consented. Her reward was to face a new, fascinating Carol. In that instant the older woman experienced a thrill of adventure. Telva's Japanesy face with the coil of shining black hair above it came to Stanley's mind as she studied this electrified Carol whose hair had been cut in an above-the-ears shingle and whose frock was an amusing English print made with odd flares and flounces. She was adjusting a floppy hat of periwinkle blue, an untrimmed, distinctive thing.

An impressive finger ring, an octagonal wrist-

watch, pumps and stockings of rose nude shade, a touch of rouge on her cheeks and one of lipstick on her mouth and a daringly embroidered wrap, one of Valja's gifts, completed Carol's costume.

"Oh, hullo," she began unceremoniously as if unconscious of the effect she had created. "Sorry Sam's away—will I do?" There was nothing of Telva's self-assurance, rather an imperious I'll-do-a-dashed-sight-better-than-Sam attitude. She might have walked down the Champs-Élysées and commanded attention, was Stanley's estimate. If only she could win Carol completely she would not mind if Ames . . .

"You're charming," she pronounced in her softest voice. "Tell me who gave you the inspiration."

Carol smiled. "Aines doesn't like it," she said in mysterious fashion as if she had discussed the matter at length. Stanley flushed.

"He is an old-fashioned lad," in a pensive manner, "I'm afraid Telva shocks him."

"Then I have galvanized him," finished Carol. "Do sit down, I have the figures about the investment—it's the northwestern utility stock you're looking up, isn't it?"

"Yes, but that can wait." Stanley dropped her pose. "Don't you think we're fond enough of Ames to be frank?"

"I don't know," retorted Carol. "It might be as well if we did not attempt to decide. I don't mind admitting that you were right—I needed to get into step with my own generation. I must have been ridiculous to everyone—a long-haired, long-skirted person who sat in judgment or else gasped with horror, who had the bad taste to admit that she loved someone

who was afraid to love her." The blue eyes were very clear as she said this last and the tilt of her head gave the Grecian features a piquant expression.

"*Afraid* to love you—why, my dear," Stanley wondered how much to accuse, how much to ask—and how little to admit.

"We won't argue about it. I merely stated a fact. As long as I cast my lot with this generation instead of staying with Valja or becoming a brow-beaten boarding-house mistress on the old farm I decided to do the thing thoroughly. I began to sell myself to myself—and it took considerable persuasion. I bought new clothes and a vanity-case. I learned to dance and drink enough to escape being conspicuous and to smoke because I found I liked it—not because it is the thing. I had a little money from the farm to invest—Sam needed a saleswoman. I proved that I could sell securities as well as anyone—if they were gilt-edged and I had the right sort of hats!" pointing solemnly to the floppy affair. "The uncertainty is great fun, pounding a typewriter one always knows what will happen."

"My dear, you're adorable," praised Stanley, "but I don't quite comprehend—such quickness, such energy, such daring; my father believed and taught me that women should wear rustling silks and read Tennyson, figuratively speaking. I still suffer from the same viewpoint. Not even Telva has been able to alter it."

"You've been in your particular sort of business all of your life and with admirable success," Carol praised. "Oh, I still want to wear rustling silks and read Tennyson—but there's time enough for that."

"Who suggested this?" a suspicion crossing Stanley's mind.

"Blair Britton," she answered without a pause.
"I thought so—and Ames opposed it?"

"Furiously. Was pathetically funny—he can't look at me without grieving for those stupid braids of hair, and when I pull out my lipstick he turns his head away. Because I served equal parts of rum, honey and lemon juice for a cocktail and labeled it 'the bees' knees'—he drank apollinaris and sulked! Dear me, he's difficult. He is resigned to Telva's flights but he wanted to have me in an antebellum setting; the sort of thing that you've trained him to revere. Perhaps we may as well come to some understanding about Ames."

Abruptly Carol moved across the room.

Stanley admired her poise but she did not succumb. "I have only a moment," she said firmly. "Yes, we ought to—to drop pretense."

"A few weeks ago I would have chosen the rôle of saint rather than conqueror," began Carol slowly, "but I'm off that, as Telva says. I want to be victor of the glen—I've decided on the most modern of ammunition—watch out! Even the sharpest of swords had to give way to cannon! When Ames found a clue to himself I let him discover a great deal of me. I had been afraid to care for anyone. I had pretended that I was love-proof, set apart from the rest of the world. When I found myself loving Ames I began to study him, decide what was wrong with this brilliant idler. You were the 'wrong,'—do you never intend to remedy it?"

"You imply—" began Stanley.

"I do—is there need to be more explicit?"

The challenge had been offered. Stanley felt a certain exhilaration coupled with fear.

"If you told him this, I am curious to know what was his answer. My son has faults but he has never lacked loyalty."

"He was afraid to answer just as he has been afraid to realize." Carol's eyes reflected swords, too.

Stanley decided to attack. "You admit that you love a man who is engaged to be married. You are trying, sensibly enough, to become an individual with a prosperous future rather than a nonentity with a broken-hearted past. I congratulate you—to date everything indicates that you will meet with success," with a gesture towards her frock. "But your attitude concerning me is unfair. You accuse me of hampering my son's development."

"Exactly." Carol was brief—even curt. "Most mothers would do so unintentionally—you deliberated, planned how best to gain your end. You have decided everything for Ames from the day that he was born. Every decision is biased by the thought as to whether it would rob you of supremacy. You would be afraid to have him marry someone he found for himself. Ames shrank from loving me—but he cared," she added earnestly, forgetting her new rôle. "It would have been so different, so wonderful if only—" throwing up her hands in despair. "But it is useless to appeal to you—you will concede nothing. Until you do I cannot break the spell. Ames will study law half-heartedly, marry Telva indifferently, adore you violently . . . the worst of it is that he believes he is quite right. He cannot analyze the conflicts that rise up from time to time to prevent peace of mind. Later they will break him—but you will be gone, and no one will be left who cares. He justifies his drone existence

by the fact that you say your very life depends upon him. . . . If ever I have a son," she finished in a ringing voice, "I'll scrub floors to keep my independence rather than enslave him. We shall end as friends. If I sat back and played the jailer and mother-siren, he might be obedient and generous—but we would not be friends. Ames is not your friend. He never confides in you. He merely agrees with all you say."

"You think a child owes nothing to its parent—to the one who gave him life?" demanded Stanley, longing to speak as harshly as she did to tradesmen who disputed her claims.

"No one has the right to impinge upon another person's individuality—whether there happens to be a blood or a legal tie. Freedom is the one God-given thing which makes life worth the effort. Curtail it and you forfeit everything. There is as much to argue against the home life of the past generation as there is to admire. For its passing there are compensations. Parents and children will allow each other the privileges due to individuals—not blood-relatives. You were taught to believe that parents knew everything; we are judging them as knowing nothing. Here's to the next crop of young things—may they reach the truthful medium. As for gratitude on the child's part—why urge that dishonest, sentimental claim? Let the obligation be that of altruistic friendship. The child is the unsolicited member of the triangle. To say, 'We gave you life—now give us your soul' . . . oh, but we are getting nowhere. I did not mean to say so much." Carol was conscious that she was being frank to the point of folly. "The stocks that you wanted to

know about—I've the memorandum as to last year's earnings"—turning to her desk.

"So we are not to be friends after all," said Stanley wistfully as if she had made the most violent sort of overtures. "Ames so wanted that to come to pass. . . . Life is quaint, isn't it, Carol?" turning to go. "Try not to be too unhappy," coming back with tiny, hurried steps which in another woman would have seemed an affectation. "Perhaps I understand more than you realize—has no one ever hinted that you are mentally arrogant, a would-be firebrand upsetting everyone's pet theories and not offering to help with the chaos? Then I hint that this is so. . . . Don't be too unhappy because of Ames, you've many years ahead—there are always many Ameses," and she actually left a soft little kiss on Carol's cheek before she hurried from the office.

CHAPTER XXV

IT IS the age of chapped knees and not chapped hands, isn't it?" drawled Blair as he finished his luncheon at the Syrian restaurant and Carol poured him a demi-tasse.

"That says it rather well. . . . Ames is late; he was to come by at two and get me."

"Probably Telva has him on the hooks for something. She says they are going to be married after the holidays."

"I wouldn't wonder." Carol did not flinch.

"Um; the mother is anxious."

"Is Sam cut up about it?" asked Carol. "He did care."

"Sam isn't the sort to be cut up—he regrets, that's about as wild an emotion as he permits himself to entertain. If he doesn't marry within a few years he'll be well content as a club bachelor with theories about disciplining children, the sort that takes vacations where there are savages with nose rings and then is invited to tea all the rest of the year in order to give terrifying travelogues."

"I wonder"—Carol stared through the smoky little room with its blue-plastered and gilt-scrolled walls—she was visualizing a vista of pinewoods with a sapphire lake lapping at the border.

"Tell us all about it, I like your sort of wonderings,"

Blair urged. "Fact is I'm deucedly fond of you. If I were ten years younger and made ten dollars more a week I'd have the audacity to try to marry you . . . in despair you might consent."

Carol looked at him in surprise. "Why, Blair, I'm ashamed of you—have you actually thought that sort of drivel?"

"I don't call it that—I've thought it very often." Blair dropped his cigarette butt into the empty cup with a despondent little sizz. "But it would be as unfair a trick as Telva's marriage to Ames. We must stay friends—we will do that, won't we? You see, I flatter myself that I understand you—and I'm so sorry about the way things have broken." His thin, finely shaped hand reached across the table and was laid gently upon her own. "If I had a daughter," a pained expression showing in his eyes, "I should like her to be you! Perhaps that is a greater compliment than to ask June if she will marry December. A long time ago someone hurt me until I thought I would live only in the hope of revenge. By and by it seemed as if the hurt must have been done to someone else. I was a numb, dull creature. . . . That will happen to you, my child, unless you find something else. He isn't worth it—none of us is."

"Was she?" Carol presumed.

"None of us are," Blair repeated.

Carol drew on her gloves. "I've the chance to sell some things this afternoon," she said as they left the restaurant. "The Simmons estate is settled and the heirs are dear old dowdies sitting about with bulging pocketbooks wondering just what it is all about. Thanks for eating with me, Blair—you always do me

a world of good. It is your turn to promise that we shall be friends——”

“‘Pies were made to keep and promises to eat,’ ” mocked Blair. “Good luck, Carol—want a suggestion for your next business scenery? Get a frock of chartreuse-green, a flowered parasol and a mammoth yellow sombrero turned up at one side. I wager that you’ll sell an entire bond issue at a single display,” his slightly stooped self vanishing in the crowd before she could answer.

After half a moment’s deliberation Carol called a taxi and started on her afternoon’s adventure. She was still wondering why Ames had not appeared, a sickish hot-cold feeling of hurt pride and disappointment clouding her energies. Probably there was an excellent excuse—a dozen such came to mind but none of them dissipated the thought that she had not been sufficiently essential to have made him override obstacles.

She settled around in the cab, one eye on the annoying meter as she powdered her nose with a deft hand. This would never do. If one was not essential to someone else, no matter how one longed to be, nothing was gained by bemoaning the fact. A rather surprising strain of determination, a curiosity regarding this modern thrill-world into which she had wandered, actuated Carol these days. In her mother’s day a girl who was poor and disappointed in love would have done the proper thing in the way of a decline, become an old maid auntie who sewed and stitched, repressing every atom of emotion by the dishonest veneer of “I never saw anyone that *I* wanted to marry,” etc. etc.

“Perhaps I’m defeated because I’ve surrendered to the enemies’ tactics,” Carol thought. Blair’s sugges-

tion recurred to her—nice old Blair, what a bruise he must have had. . . . Chartreuse-green, a flowered parasol and an upturned lemon-colored sombrero—she almost believed that she would. With a half-ashamed, half-triumphant pang she remembered the saying that “no woman ever committed suicide on her way to buy a new hat.”

No matter how deep the disappointment—as deep as Blair’s perhaps—she must not let it take youth and beauty and thrills from her. She needed all three. Carol was determined to live. She had roused from her lethargy of brooding. Life with her father and Valja were closed chapters. She still clung to her ideals and naïve convictions. But she was not unmindful that having ivory, satiny skin and red-gold hair was a help to making sales. Hers should be the modern type of heartbreak—it consisted in finding thrills instead of tears, of keeping oneself on tiptoe, being smartly dressed, interested in impersonal hobbies. She would feature her odd heritage. She was a business-débutante and enjoying it hugely. She had “come out” via the Samuel Russell Company and was doing famously considering her brief novitiate. There were endless business-débutantes no matter where one turned—manicures and miniature painters, antique dealers and esthetic dancing teachers, genealogists, dentists, corsetières, politicians! They were all bent on the same mad errand—thrills.

The taxi bumped to a standstill before the house containing the dear old dowdies. As she ran up the steps she felt something as one feels at a horse race after laying a bet on an unknown contestant.

Emerging from the ponderous walnut doors an hour

later Carol was triumphant but tired. In imagination she was spending part of her commission as Blair had advised—with something more put by for her pied-à-terre in the Arts Studio Building. She was buying a small coupé which resembled a grown-up baby pram; she would have a fur coat and a trip to Bermuda and join a business woman's eating-to-music club where one sang songs to the tune of "Annie Laurie" or "Collegiate" and called each other by one's first names while devouring a mediocre plate luncheon for eighty-five cents. It all helped. The Players' Club helped; Blair helped. Even Telva was not a detriment—Telva who was preparing to marry "my angel of an Ames and be his black sheep for ever and ever" as she had broadcasted . . . yet Carol found herself wondering all over again why Ames had failed to keep his appointment!

Dalefield both approved and exclaimed regarding Carol's transformation. Dalefield was one of those staid industrial cities which pride themselves upon the younger generation. Rather than admit offenses on the part of the last it asserted that Dalefield's younger set was sound at heart and brilliant of brain, to be matched against any other younger set in the country.

The week after she lunched with Blair she moved into the Arts Studio Building. She furnished the odd, six-sided room in Balkan colors. Valja's offerings came to light and caused callers to gasp with envy. India prints and silk scarfs, rugs of orange and black with turquoise-blue all mixed up in the pattern, Arabian carpet saddle-bags, old brass, a few prints, her father's books and a little of the original Clive silver—a Winchester blackjack mug which her mother had brought

to the new country. Carol had smiled with tolerant scorn as she found a place for this barmaid's souvenir!

She planned on giving her own sort of parties—the music furnished by her playing on a Roumanian zither and serving queer yet delectable messes cooked in the near-Dutch oven which her father had made in lieu of a chafing dish. She felt at home in the little studio—she hummed as she hung pictures and unpacked and hammered and scrubbed. Then she went forth in her best bib and tucker and sold securities, met new and curious friends and invited them to her pied-à-terre to judge for themselves whether or not she was "the thing." Telva came to criticize and remained to admire. Blair and his newspaper crowd were always keen for an invitation. Even Sam Russell was decoyed for a party while the Players' Club stormed the studio, not leaving it until dawn.

The chartreuse-green dress hung in the wardrobe beside its giddy mates, a row of bizarre shoes and a shelf with passionate hats. What an old-fashioned joke she must have seemed—almost as much of a joke as it was to keep Ames at arm's length, apparently unaware that the time for him to go to New York was near at hand. She had been Miss Antique in those other days, perhaps her attraction for him was the same as that of any collector who likes to take some quaint oddity from a cabinet to examine it carefully—but momentarily.

If this was morbid it also made her adamant when Ames pressed his desire to see her. Were not six apologies, two corsages and three letters sufficient to explain his delay in not keeping the August engagement? Not even a temperamental Telva could have been more unreasonable. He was going away—largely

because she had influenced him; must he go without having seen her alone? The one visit at her apartment when the Players had their frolic had been nothing but an aggravation, for Carol had managed to keep aloof and to say, "Yes, Ames," and "Do have some more," or "Sorry, but being chef I can't dance tonight," and had devoted herself to everyone else until there was nothing left but to watch this distracting Carol as she circled about her guests and sang melancholy Slavic folk-songs to the tinkling zither accompaniment.

If Stanley glimpsed what kept Ames in a brooding frame of mind, now irritable, now irresponsible, her efforts to lure Carol to the little red jewel-box were of no avail. Carol was so sorry but she could not come to tea or Sunday night supper, nor even to the proposed farewell dinner for Ames. After watching Ames neglect his breakfast and herself for all of ten days Stanley felt matters to be critical.

So she took Telva shopping and bought her a chest of linen, hinting that next June ought to be the logical wedding date. She would send them to Norway on their honeymoon and when they came back the little New York apartment would be ready. As for herself? Ah, that did not matter, her day was over. She was content to come to Dalefield and count off the days until the holidays when they should visit her. She might go south or perhaps to Paris . . . she was growing old, did Telva realize it? Come, she need not be afraid of being honest.

Impressed by this propaganda—and the chest of linens—Telva felt something akin to tenderness as she

assured Stanley that June would be the proper time and that all things would be as she had wished.

While this conference was on, Ames had made a determined appearance at the offices of Samuel Russell and Company. He was going to take Carol to lunch or to her flat or to drive or to walk or to fly, whatever she wished, but he was not going to leave the office without her—did she understand? There were many things that he intended saying and she had given him no alternative but to storm her business headquarters at the risk of making himself obnoxious . . . well, was it to be lunch? Good. At her studio? Better still.

Not sure of what he was going to say but satisfied with her consent, Ames waited until Carol found the lemon sombrero and the flowered parasol and strolled with him into the September sunshine.

CHAPTER XXVI

YOURS is a dynamic personality, capable of presiding simultaneously over two worlds," decided Ames as Carol finished her after-luncheon cigarette in an expert manner, flecking its ashes into the fireplace and listening with an indifferent air. "Incidentally, you are making me feel that I've overstayed any reasonable bounds yet we've not said anything satisfactory. If I pay tribute to your ability won't you please be yourself?"

"When I was myself things went badly. I was stupid and made no money." She stifled a yawn as if the possibility of being herself was too boring for serious consideration.

The sun slanted through the turret windows and made her hair seem dancing flames, abbreviated flames, Ames found himself thinking although he admired the way the boyish shingle high-lighted the amber tints of the hair.

"Does this new person with eight dinner engagements for the seven nights in a week care for me at all?" he demanded.

Carol shrugged her shoulders. "Part of me will always care. But I've decided to put that part in moth-balls. It may be nice to rediscover when I'm old and dependent upon memories. For now I'm a hardworking business-débutante who wishes you well in your new career——"

"I doubt it. I think you want me to come a cropper for the good of my soul." Ames stood before the unused fireplace with its plump Hessian soldiers acting as andirons. His jaw had assumed a sudden determination. His eyes betrayed hard, steely tints as if he planned some definite line of conduct the outcome of which must result in victory.

Carol's color heightened beyond the boundaries of her rouge.

"What an idea!" she continued in a gay, impersonal way. "As if I didn't wish you all the success in the world. As if—" Yet she seemed to have reached the end of her resources. Annoyed at her lack of poise, she pushed her Chinese stool away from the red lacquer lunch table.

Carol's was the disconcerting realization that this new personality was a brittle affair which failed one at crucial moments. More difficult than losing Ames was his disappointment by her apparent surrender to the day's moron-culture. Without pause she had joined with everyone in doing the same quick, showy, thrilling things, wearing the same expensive daring clothes, chattering the same shallow philosophy—only to discover that it was as monotonous as it was unreal. Suddenly she realized that she was in danger of losing something which was worth more than selling all manner of securities or having a studio with near-Bohemians coming in to trill glibly: "Marvelous—my dear, it's too perfect—I can't bear it—absolutely superb—"

She was in danger of losing a rugged, often embarrassing sense of honesty in pretending to her own self that play was quite the same as work, personality

always preferable to character, while one's individuality meant one's ability to camouflage. Had she so surrendered because Ames had not been strong enough to circumvent Stanley (Carol never thought of her by any other name) as an enticing but formidable dragoness who stood guard before his heart? What really mattered was that Ames must know that she not only loved but believed in him. Her belief would endure no matter whether he failed or succeeded, regardless of Stanley's standing guard. She was no longer ashamed of these facts; she was ashamed of her impulsive modernism. Up to a certain point Blair had been right —she needed to become one of her own age. But not to the extent of allowing Ames to drift into a new career as little equipped as a broken-legged man to enter a marathon. He must not become a sleek, well-paid and little-worked attorney. Yet the real Ames would not rise above his handicaps unless——

Why hesitate to finish the thought? Unless someone cared sufficiently to help him act his dreams rather than dream his acts; to make him realize that life and love are seldom one and the same thing. She must prove beyond doubt that she would prefer to be considered obsolete rather than cheap. She must not let him go to New York with Stanley following in his wake, allowing him to be married to Telva with the air of a benevolent despot. She must arouse the soldier in Ames as well as the savant.

How could she tell him that she felt equal and willing to do this thing? Oh, for the smell of pinewoods instead of cigarette smoke! She longed to face this issue with Ames back in her father's farmhouse. So circumstanced she would have the dignity with which

to speak. Simultaneously she found herself thinking that big decisions are apparently determined by petty events; if Ames had not sought her out upon this particularly free day and they had not come to the studio because of a guilty remembrance of not having taken in the milk and an economical urge to finish some boned chicken—if they had not come here—what then? They might have lunched at a tea-room to be interrupted by the waitress and passing acquaintances. They would have said many words but nothing of the truth, parting with mutual disillusionment . . . there were any number of like-possibilities. Why think of them just now? It was enough to be alone. Her father had never flinched; he had endured. Valja had never flinched: she had fought, beating the air as it were with violent, empty blows. Stanley had never flinched: she had made others flinch. But Ames—Ames flinched.

“I want you,” she heard him saying; “I know now that I want you more than anything else in the world.”

“Are you sure?” It was like a dialogue they had rehearsed until its meaning was somewhat lost. “Then you may have me.” She wondered how the words sounded. The hardish lights in Ames’s eyes changed into tender eagerness.

“What do you mean?” (More of this strangely familiar dialogue which must be spoken; she wondered if it so appealed to him.)

“Exactly what I said. I cannot let you fail. It is failing to go to New York and have them dictate the terms. I will go with you.”

“But—” (Yes, that was in the dialogue, too—that indefinite, weak “but” that he felt in duty bound to say.)

"I don't ask you to break with Telva just now. I don't want to marry you. I love you too much. I want to be with you since you say that you need me, let me show you what I mean instead of this endless talking, talking." (The dialogue was ending; she would begin to voice her original thoughts.)

"You don't know what you are offering. I can not let you." He did not try to come nearer; instead he stood back as if aghast at what she had said.

"My father loved someone who loved him; their error was marriage. Oh, I'm not saying that I'm unworthy to marry you," she added proudly, as Jim Clive's daughter would be bound to add. "But marriage would be fatal. I refuse it at any price and on my terms because of Stanley. Can't you believe that I mean what I say—no matter if I've often said what other people think that I mean? I am not afraid to go with you. You are—that's half the trouble. It is neither time to hesitate nor analyze, to wonder why you came to the north woods or why I happened to be there or why we loved each other—it is the time to decide and then to act. I have told you that I am not afraid to love you, but I have yet to prove it. You have said that you loved me, but you have not been free enough or great enough to prove it. She has made you be content with day-dreams, dissipation, aimless self-pity. Oh, I understand. Sometimes I feel that you might be my child and not hers." The blue eyes closed to prevent tears starting from under the black lashes.

In another moment she was in his arms. Instead of dialogue there followed tense, half-completed sentences:

"When you said that I could have you——"

"Yes, yes, I mean it—I—"

"Of course you can't be expected to realize, neither can I—"

"I tell you that I do and that you must."

"What would the world say?"

"Why consult the world?" Carol heard herself call out. "I've found it a stupid world. I'll go back to my woods when I've saved you. I had convinced myself that they were unbearable—now they will be my haven—"

"Don't tempt me. Remember I've always had everything that I wanted—"

"Not everything—you merely believed that you had. She made you think the moon would be yours if you howled loud enough but that it would be unchivalrous to put her to such bother. Isn't she clever? Yet I wish that we might have been friends—please, please don't kiss me again—"

"I'd be taking everything and giving you nothing—"

"Life hasn't many prizes that are of use."

"Let's be concrete. Do you mean that you'd come to New York with me—we must make ourselves come to our senses. (Darling, let's don't try too hard.) We must remember that wiser ones than we have tried to be revolutionary—only to fail."

"We must chance it. Eventually you must stand alone—without Stanley, without me. Oh, but you must . . . not another kiss . . . not just now—"

"You are as wonderful as you are precious; I'm such a cad, I want to sneak away with you, only to shout from the housetops that you are mine."

"Let me help you be free—let us prove it to her."

The blue eyes were shining, triumphant. There was nothing of the uncertain girl he had just kissed. "If I can do that much I shall be content——"

"No, no," he begged as if asking some indulgence. "Don't tempt me——"

"I am not tempting; I am offering." Tears again threatened. She was annoyed at her lack of poise. Ames caught her in another close embrace.

"I love all of you," he found himself saying, "I want you—it must come right for you as well as me. We were meant for each other but not for foolish sacrifice——"

"I realize what I am saying; I tell you that I do not wish to marry you," furious at his arguments.

Now it was Ames who seemed mature, protecting. "It would mean that you'd end all hurt and helpless. I'd despise myself for the rest of time. Let's be practical, Carol—let's talk it out—I mean your plan——"

"I want to come to New York and keep your house, be your comrade. All I ask is that she knows; Telva will not care, if it does not become town-talk and if her engagement apparently stands. But I will not go under cover. Stanley must know."

"She would be horrified, stunned——"

"Not shocked, don't add that. Stanley is as wise as the sphinx and infinitely more charming. She would be frightened. She would tell Telva—unless Telva gets wind of it first and tells her. Together they would bully you—under the guise of broken hearts and tears."

"I cannot let you——"

"You mean that you are afraid! You can not tell her that I have refused marriage but that I will accept your love," with a defiant toss of the head. "Once they

see that I am in earnest, that you are brave enough to claim me, Telva's modern tolerance will vanish. She will be the same as any woman who realizes marriage as her final goal; she will weep in your arms while she scratches your cheek! Stanley will be taken ill, she will expect you to turn penitent; as for me——”

“As for you, darling, let's talk about that.” He was persistent and ashamed at once. His arms kept their tense hold of her as he waited for her to continue.

“I give myself as freely as I will take myself away when the time comes. I would rather have this sort of love between us, if only for a little, than heavy, legalized years of——”

“You are so sweet, so foolish.” He forced himself to add, “Are we losing our heads?”

“Why not? We have found our hearts. Oh, the mistakes of marriage are far more unbearable than those of love——”

“As brave sounding as it is untrue. You are both an innocent and an ignorant girl and I am a cad, an opportunist.”

“I grant you all of that,” a mischievous smile relieving the tension. “Our love will make you something other than a cad; I shall become a wise and sobered woman—is that not worth while? Have you thought what it means to me to go with you—to be as ruthless in my way as Stanley has been in hers? I don't care about myself—it is you—you——”

“But it must come right for you——”

Carol broke away from him, her eyes searching his face as if waiting for him to retract something, to offer something. She looked out of the turret window with its fluttering curtains of thin blue silk to the restless

autumn sky. When she turned back to Ames she was no longer eager and young but pensive, weary. It was hard to realize that Ames could not rise to certain expectations. She must supply courage as well as love.

"I can't believe what you have said, dearest; I must not let myself," he was saying. "Think what it would mean to have you in New York, to be together——" He was all vague impulses. Carol's assuring smile caused him to finish:

"I'm like a man coming out from under an anesthetic, saying the things he has always repressed. I'm not sure of anything except wanting you so much. Yet I cannot bear to hear you speak of my mother as you do. You could still become friends. Shall I be selfish enough to accept your sacrifice? Precious, do you know how much I need you? When I try to look to a future without you things go blank and lifeless . . . when I try to think of letting you come with me—no, never that. Shall we wait? Will you try to be friends with her?"

"Please, no fairy-tales." Carol's hand was raised in abrupt protest. "When I come with you—and I think that is what I shall do—she will call me all sorts of melodramatic things." Carol tried to laugh. "She will pretend to be crushed but she will be furious. For then she will know how in earnest I am. She could not conceive of going to someone who needed her and trusting to fate and the someone to make it come right. Yet why should I hesitate or you quibble? Even Valja who is a trifle mad would say, 'Go, you fool, you can't do otherwise.' Of course we must think of the practical things," with a change of voice; "all I ask is that Stanley knows—let her realize that while you will not

marry against her wishes, neither will you deny true love. That I am willing to go with you—to leave you when you no longer want me. Telva," as if he had again brought up the subject, "will arrange matters for herself. . . . Go, my dear, my very own," as he kissed her lips, "be glad for now even if later we must realize that love has ended and life begun."

"What would you do if that should happen? How would you think of me?"

"I would go back to my woods to become a successful, rather lonely person in the matter of a tea-room and boarders and memories—Valja would come limping back to me and I could think of you as someone whom I had saved even if they had made me suffer. Oh, must I beg further? Every word I've said is true—the only other thing that could happen is as remote as Stanley's becoming my friend—"

"Please tell me," he said abruptly.

"It would be for you to say, 'I want you for my wife—to the devil with the rest of the world.' That is what you can't do and what I love you enough to forego. I'll play crutch until you can walk alone."

"I'm as fortunate as I am unworthy." Ames's head was on her shoulder. "I warn you—look to your own interests. I love you. You need plead no longer . . . still, it must all come right!"

CHAPTER XXVII

WHAT'S the big wow?" asked Telva petulantly. Surprising Stanley off guard was pleasing to neither. Telva realized that the former's good temper was more enduring if she was dressed for her part. It was displeasing to Stanley not alone from natural vanity but because catching her unawares gave one an inkling that this reddish-faced, untidy little person could do other things than tremble and weep. Stanley's was the correct idea regarding the rôle she had elected: if one does a thing at all do it thoroughly!

"I'm so sorry that I didn't know you were coming," she began, irritated by the fact that her cambric smock was spotted and her hair stringy. She had been going through old boxes, destroying bills and letters, sorting out clothes and examining linens. It was the sort of rainy afternoon task which she enjoyed with the aid of some ale and strongish cheese sandwiches—but she did not wish anyone to know of this recreation nor did she enjoy Telva's glance in the direction of her feet in broad, felt slippers, one toe of which was broken. In the emergency of the moment she told herself that she must take better care not to allow her future daughter-in-law to arrive unannounced. She might happen in during a tirade at a servant or having an unlovely but comfortable siesta swaddled in blankets with

her hair brushed straight back and greased with tonic while horn-rimmed spectacles aided her to read the last censored novel. . . . Telva's ability to slip about resembled that of an eel. . . .

"The big—what—wow?" readjusting her personalities as much as was possible. "My dear girl, do forget that I exist for half a moment," scurrying into her clothes room and wrapping herself in a plumb-colored mandarin coat, her hair hastily banished under a lace cap. "I had to take a sort of domestic inventory; Ames would be distressed if he suspected. He loathes my doing anything of the sort—sit there—now explain the term 'big wow,'" with a longing look at her dressing-table with its nearby yet useless toilet accessories.

"Ames and Carol are the big wow. Better than a state lottery to know who is right and who is wrong." Telva's face was more Japanesy than ever. Her small eyes glittered like cut jet as she watched Stanley for a hint of having known about the "big wow." "It is not the pleasantest thing in the world, if it is true. I'm liberal, I grant, and I've had my moments—certainly I have never begrudged nor questioned Ames as to his. But we *are* engaged. I believe you're fond of me—or of my engagement, if you prefer to put it that way—"

Stanley's fluttery little gesture of reassurance was ignored.

"I'm not pretending to adore Ames as she does—I'm not such a fool. I rather like him or I wouldn't have fallen in with your plan—come, what's the use of pretending that it wasn't your plan! Since you have no idea about the 'big wow' may I have the honor to inform you, dear Stanley-in-law, that your son has

developed a great flair for Carol regardless of how obedient he has been to date? I conclude that Carol is more a supergirl than innocent fool. I have it quite straight," Telva's lips in a thin, red line and scarcely seeming to move, "that she has chucked her job and all the rest of the plums she has picked for herself and is going to New York with Ames—don't swoon—interesting things are still to be told," as Stanley first grew very red and then sank back in a chair.

"Of all the absurd and malicious lies——"

"Um—hardly; of all the absurd and impractical plans. As his fiancée I take it as a smack on the cheek. If he must have someone play housekeep before we are married why not some unimportant little thing about whom no one need be concerned?"

"Explain how you heard this rumor 'straight,'" commanded Stanley in a thick voice. "And remember that I am with you."

"Thanks so much. Not that it matters, but I'm relieved that you aren't going to ask me to go to New York with Ames until we marry." A curious chuckle interrupted yet emphasized Telva's words—it betrayed her anger. She was planning as she talked just as Stanley was beginning to plan. "I got the news from Blair Britton who is oiling up his flintlock to take your son's heart's blood. Blair is keen for Carol; all told, she has quite a following. The north woods must be quite a place!"

"This sounds like Blair's nonsense. Where is Ames—where is this girl? The rumor must be stopped."

"Blair heard it from Carol," Telva resumed. "Then Sam told me that Carol resigned because of going to New York. He said she was no longer the poised lady

whom Dalefield's Chamber of Commerce has come to recognize but an agitated human eager to lose everything for the sake of a man who is a coward." In spite of herself Telva was fair. "Sam was dashed when she left him; he liked her in the business. After a few questions she made no pretense but what she would see much of Ames. Now, Sam likes me—an old habit of his—so he was not long in relaying the news. I tried to round up Ames but he was unavailable. So I sought out Blair because he usually knows what Ames is doing whether Ames knows it or not. Then——" pausing to enjoy the suspense.

"Yes?" Stanley's face was a crimson knot of unbecoming angry wrinkles.

"I found Blair about to kill Ames. Lovely! Only he knows he is not a good shot and hates messes." Without warning, Telva gave way to hysteria.

Stanley ran for spirits of ammonia. "Tell me the rest," she insisted, longing to administer a vigorous shake.

"It seems that Ames came down to tell him all that Carol had offered, sort of borrowing moral courage either to accept or to decline. It is some high-flown, idealistic thing that could be the charter for a free-love community; all about his needing someone who would be with him and yet allow him freedom, how she considered marriage a clumsy, unfair arrangement, gloried in sharing her love and so on—quite Ibsenish! It made me feel that I'd prefer flannel nighties and coming down to breakfast. Ames accepted the offer like the magnanimous and amorous male he is. They will go to New York next week after telling you but letting the world guess what it likes. If you don't bring your

son to his senses"—anger overrode curiosity and Telva's face was as crumpled with wrath as Stanley's—"if you cannot have the thing decently broken off—I'll—I'll—" Suddenly she smiled. The same gruff laugh came leaking through her words to make them twice as threatening.

"I'll dress and we'll go to her," was Stanley's first impulse. "No—I'll send for Blair . . . however, Ames was to be home for dinner unless—" They regarded each other with uncertainty.

"She is to cook and mend and scrub for him as I take it," Telva postscripted. "Perhaps that is what put Blair on the warpath. He can't abide sin conducted along sweatshop lines! It will be interesting to sit back and watch what happens, won't it, Stanley-in-law?"

Stanley regarded Telva with dismay. How was she to be rid of her while she conferred with Blair? If there was truth in the story and Blair had turned against Ames to "save" Carol, his tongue would be anything but flattering regarding her own self. It was Stanley's turn to be in danger.

During the next half hour Telva returned to report to Stanley that she could not unearth Blair—he had left the office in characteristic hermit-like silence. They must wait for Ames.

"Ames will come home; I will soon enough straighten it out." Stanley had had time in which to use her powder puff. Silvery stockings and slippers set off the plum-colored robe and a bandeau compensated for the lack of a curl. She was ready for any one of the three!

Without warning Telva decided to leave the stage

to Stanley. The latter's gratitude was not without misgivings. It was unlike Telva to withdraw from the scene of action which so vitally concerned herself.

"I'm dog-tired," she explained. "I won't wait for Ames—I leave him in competent hands. I want to be alone—to think." She was as mysterious as she was unconvincing.

Stanley hesitated as to whether to let her go. Perhaps Telva might serve as a sort of Greek chorus in repeating commands and reproaches.

"Do stay, my dear. This is merely a mistake. It is like Blair to flare into action on the slightest provocation—sublimating his histrionic ability." But Telva dashed off into the rainy night leaving Stanley with a feeling of impatient relief.

It was late before Ames came in. As he entered her room—wisely she had gone to bed—she knew that it was no stupid mistake.

"My dear," she began in a low, broken voice, "I am beside myself with worry. Little Telva has been here and gone away; the child is heartbroken. She says that you have actually—"

"Have you seen the evening papers?" interrupted Ames. His careless appearance suggested physical strife; his face had the pallor which only shock can give. What impressed Stanley more than either of these was the new, straight-ahead expression in his eyes. He looked at her as if he saw through her clever make-up, physical and mental, ignoring her outstretched hands.

"My dear, I've seen nothing since Telva told me that—"

"The Princess Valja came to Dalefield to-day—run to cover as it were. Carol was her refuge. She would have run to Carol if it had meant an underground railway to Texas, I believe. Carol was her last stand—beastly selfish and unfair. She has been spending enormous sums in New York. Due to the drug habit she exceeded every limit. She was so involved that it meant she was more than done—she was in the shadow of the law. When she had to forego morphine due to no funds, the inevitable followed. From a generous derelict she became a defeated fiend: she knew that the world was massed against her; she was liable for defrauding the mails due to some wildcat publishing scheme, heaven only knows its ramifications. So she ran to Carol. She said but two sentences, 'So he has made you suffer'—meaning me. She had warned Carol when we first met. The other: 'I can laugh no more.' She has insisted that when one could no longer laugh one had no reason to live. Without consideration or skill"—Ames spoke with a cruel precision that Stanley had never suspected him of being capable of—"she stabbed herself in the chest and died in Carol's arms. It's a great wreck—the worst of which is that Carol is unfairly involved. As Valja's former secretary she is the prey of the press and the district attorney. She will be put on the rack about something over which she had no control. Valja's possessions are reduced to a shabby traveling bag and an old dog, Wonk. Yet Carol will be grilled and spied upon to see if she is concealing the crown jewels. Creditors will persecute her if they cannot prosecute her until they are satisfied that she is as poor as she is blameless. There's the funeral to be gotten through and the publicity to die away, the

tragedy to fade from her memory—*mia*, won't you go to her and stand by?"

"I?" Stanley sat upright and drew a tulle scarf about her shoulders. "Stand by this girl whom your future wife tells me has offered herself to you—some vulgar free love thing?"

"Telva would express it in that way." Ames's smile was not contagious. "I presume she told you that Blair is on my trail with nothing short of a noose should I accept Carol's love and that up to a few hours ago I would have been knave enough to do so regardless of a dozen Blairs. But Telva has not been able to tell you how frightened Carol is—not because of her offer to me but because she finds how life can grip one unexpectedly. Apparently she is more numb than stubborn . . . at least that impressed me when she refused to listen to why I had changed my mind. In an instant it came to me that no matter how a man and woman may wish to live with each other because of true love they must not do so unless they are man and wife. A clumsy arrangement, I grant you, but one which cannot be foregone at this stage of the game. Society and our own selves would turn against us in time. No love nor sacrifice could be great enough to prevent it—unless it was the sacrifice of separation. I have been cheap, *mia*, your son, think of it! But it is because you have loved me so dearly." He sank down beside her bed, his rumpled head buried in his flushed hands, the veins of which stood out prominently. Stanley felt as if a hysterical stranger had broken into her room. With an effort she recalled herself and listened as he went on:

"Blair has gone to help her out of the publicity mire

and to convince her that she is worse than a lost soul to care for me—a fool. Already Mrs. Grundy has frowned upon her in the shape of Sam Russell who hurried to inform the world that Miss Clive had resigned from his office and was in no way connected with his investment house. It would never do for middle-class, climbing Sam to have stood by a poor and beautiful girl who had decided that the man she loved was so weak that she must be his crutch, to say nothing of being hurled into a Slavish tragedy with coroners and police reporters battering at her door . . . truly Sam is doomed to become an esteemed citizen!"

He lifted his head to look at Stanley, wincing at her agitation. But it was due to the sudden walking of a ghost, absurd as it might seem. The ghost of Donna Lovell—there was the same fearless suffering in this boy's voice, the same hurt yet courageous expression in his eyes. He was not beaten, he was not going to welch: he was going to be free. Already Carol's victory was won.

Sensing something of this Stanley sank back gracefully and let the ends of tulle caress his hot, trembling hands. This reckless, fascinating enemy, Carol, had brought about the disaster to Stanley's kingdom. She felt unequal to answering his impetuous outburst of:

"I had meant to come to you, *mia*, and tell you what we were to do—you don't doubt that, do you?" with something of the old adoration in his eyes.

"Of course, my own dear son," patting his hand gently.

"I could not have done as thorough a job of it a few hours ago—it took beaten old Valja to stab her-

self and let Carol be the center of the breaking storm . . . I'll always hate myself for that, too. No matter how things straighten away I'll feel that I had to be fairly driven into line. What I would have told you was that I love Carol; I need her as I have never needed any woman. But I would not marry as long as you felt as you did. For some unfair reason you have refused to be her friend—you shoved Telva into my arms like a property doll and then stood back saying, 'Bravo—love's sweet dream.' I was silent because I've grown up being silent whenever you wished me to be—because I love you so. Oh, I've not a hope that Carol will marry me—but things can never go back on the old tame-cat basis. I'm afraid I've grown up, *mia* . . . I'm perilously near middle-age. I've seen what life does to a person in defeat; you've only let me see what it does when one is a success. Yet you've been so generous, so loyal," fighting with himself as to which side was to dominate. "But you have cared too hard—loved me too much."

For an instant Stanley had the impulse to confess, "No, I loved myself too much." Instead, she let a discreet tear linger on her cheek.

"It is terrible to hear you say such things," she whimpered, "to shut me out of your life—to speak of Carol's wisdom—my dear son, my one *raison d'être*—"

Ames's lips twitched as if he were bearing physical pain without an outcry. "I sha'n't marry Telva. I was a traitor to myself to be let in for even the promise. Nor shall I marry Carol."

Stanley's eye gleamed with hope. A bachelor son who had been "tricked" or "deceived" by someone was

not such a dull prospect. It would be as safe as having him turn priest. How they could travel—how she would enjoy seeing India and Java—she would convert some of her jewelry into funds so as to make Ames feel reconciled to not going ahead with reading law. He must be convinced that it would be a tiresome affair as compared to traveling round and round the globe. She could suggest that he write or there would be some harmless hobby with which he should become intrigued.

“My heartbroken boy,” her hand caressing his bright hair.

“I shall always want to marry her,” he broke in without warning. “But—Carol understands. She’s the sort to bleed white for a cause in which she believes. Perhaps she wouldn’t marry me if I told her that your wishes were to be set aside. Valja’s death only clinched the notion that she is different from the rest of us, marked for an unusual, lonely life. That’s carved in her very heart, the poor darling.”

Stanley’s plans for traveling were temporarily set aside. “There is Telva,” she began gently. She must knock at every door to see if she could enter.

“It won’t be too terrible for Telva.” Ames’s eyes were scornful. He might have added that Telva had waylaid him before coming home. He was to keep an appointment with her later on, a meeting that he would do well to keep if he wished peace of mind as Telva had hinted.

There was much to be gotten through with—his cause to plead with Blair, to convince Carol that she was as wrong as she was worth while; his career should prove to the former how deep was his respect

concerning whatever she wished; there was Valja to lay at rest, her enemies to satisfy—and then work. He was eager for the last: impersonal work removed from emotion and sentimental ties. He would have turned to ditch digging if necessary, any steady, absorbing employment that took him away from this powerful yet pitiful little person who stroked his head and told him how sorry she was but that some day he would look back and see that she had been right. How could any mother forgive herself if she should come to feel responsible for the love-tragedy of her child? His marriage to Telva had seemed a wise provision—perhaps, she, too, had been puzzled over the thing called romance and had been trying to spare him possible disillusionment. How she had pondered and prayed over it! At least he would come to be grateful for having avoided any illicit attachment . . . Telva would get on all right, she conceded. (She thought with regret of the pre-nuptial presents she had bestowed and of Telva's ability to retain whatever had been given her.) For now—Ames was tired and probably hungry—some brandy—coffee—a hot tub and bed? Must he return to that girl's studio? would his name be dragged into the sensational reports of the suicide? That last would be too unfair; she abhorred scenes. This was neither the time nor the place to talk more of Carol but she knew that he had been spared. Some day he would voluntarily tell her so. . . .

Looking into her bright eyes Ames realized that Stanley knew a great deal about life as well as love. His first reaction was that of a recoil—perhaps she knew more of life and love than any of them. But she

was not generous enough to have said a just word regarding Carol, her enemy. He was deaf to her murmurs about a lonely childhood, her adored father, her unhappy marriage, the memory of the love Telva's father had once offered . . . how her heart beat . . . she was afraid to breathe deeply . . . would he mind holding her in his arms? Ah, he was her one consolation, worth everything she had in the world, every effort she had ever made . . . and now to have to stand by and see him suffer . . . no, she could not bear it. They must go exploring some new, wild corner of the earth where the problems of the overcivilized did not penetrate. Was that not a wise suggestion?

She did not seem to notice his lack of response as he laid her back among the pillows, her head sagging wearily to one side.

After a moment Ames forced himself to say:

"I can't come away and play as you suggest. I must work. I must see Carol through this thing, make it clear to her that I will not accept the sacrifice she misnames as love. I can't marry Telva, but I won't cheat Carol. If she cannot see the thing as I do——"

"You mean that you might marry her?" Stanley was on the defensive. "How utterly I should lose you if that were true! Your death would be easier to bear. You have no right to desert me now." She laid her cheek against his so that he could feel the hot, distressed tears.

No matter what happened there was work, that unfailing panacea. His heart might ache and his soul grow dull but his head would remain sane, worthily

occupied. Cold-bloodedly he told himself that a heart-break was easier to stand than a mental crash. Women and emotions must not comprise any man's horizon. He must dissociate himself from emotion until he could be master of it. Emotionally his mother had enslaved him. She precluded work since she knew its powers. He was unmindful of Carol, just as Stanley's sobs fell upon deaf ears as he grew impatient to find his work. It was a generous compromise with romance. He would not harm the woman he loved but he would not give to the woman who had borne him the cruellest thrust of all. Outwardly, his mother remained supreme. Inwardly, he faintly despised her.

These were the best terms Stanley could effect. Another quarter of an hour of tearful appeals, a half-way "sinking spell" won nothing more than this terse promise.

"But it can never be quite the same. Not that wonderful tie that once blessed us even as it bound. You speak bravely now—but in the 'after-silence' following any crisis you will regret and resent——"

"You shall never know of it," he promised. He had risen and was standing beside her bed looking down at her, admiring her in the same lack-luster way that he despised her—a new, alarming sensation. She did it so well! He was promising himself that he would succeed—with the pardonable indulgence of a distressed heart. Success was to be an antidote. For now, he must get through the next few days with as little strain as possible.

"Ah, but I would read your moods—I have always been able to read them," Stanley protested. How ef-

fective was the veil of blue gauze which gave her throat the appearance of a young girl dressed for a party.

"Life is nothing but a series of compromises," Ames found himself saying glibly. "I've been longer in realizing it than most. Rest, *mia*—I'll not be back as usual—there are things to look after—"

"For—Carol?" Stanley's lips formed the words unwillingly.

"Some of them," was the incomplete answer.

He felt oppressed, unfairly harassed. He wished that he might never enter her room again lest he lose this new-found sense of values.

Now for the things to be looked after—the first of which was to see Telva!

CHAPTER XXVIII

TELVA was business-like. Curiosity was secondary to greed. Unlike Stanley she affected neither a good-looking costume nor a heartbreak. She was the bizarre, uncertain Telva that he had first met as his mother's bootleggerette. Her boldly spotted black-and-white dress was in need of pressing—and of hooks and eyes. She wore soiled pink kid slippers and stockings, nude shade. To make her appearance the more absurd on this sultry September night her hat was no less than of rabbit's fur dyed a violent purple!

It was like Telva to express her mental state in some such untidy fashion. She was ready for Ames! He sensed as much when he entered her recently acquired sitting-room. Stanley's picture was on the mantel, his own beside it. A chest filled with his mother's gift of linens was opened to view. He wondered if this was merely a coincidence. Telva was not given to useless gestures.

"I've heard all that I want to hear about it," she said abruptly, her black eyebrows meeting in an annoyed peak. "The evening papers certainly flay your late princess to the last ounce and are not slow in hinting that Carol may be concealing contraband in her chimneypiece . . . too bad she is in the lime-light at just this time."

"Isn't it?" Ames waited for her to go on.

"I've known our marriage was to be one of convenience. It suited both your mother and myself—you were the one whose status was in doubt. I can't say that I admired you——"

"I can't say that I admired myself," he agreed.

"I'm sorry we must break; deucedly hard at this time. I've so let go of my contracts. You know how flat broke my people are. I've sent them money ever since I started bootlegging. Lately I've had to send less with the promise of more as soon as I was your wife. What with this Valja scandal and Carol's offer to be your soul-mate—what a lie that word is—well, just what are you willing to do for me?" Her lips set in the thin, bright line which meant that she was not to be gainsaid.

"What do you expect?" to make quick work of it.

"How much have you? Oh, I'm not above taking 'heart-balm'—that's on a par with 'soul-mate'—I don't mind showing my hand. In due time I shall marry Sam. He is so deadly middle-class that he'd never dare to be unconventional. But Sam must think I am a crushed and disillusioned lamb." When she laughed he longed to take her by her untidy shoulders and shake her into silence.

"What do you want?" he repeated. Yet this was easier than the hour with Stanley. Dollars began and ended the transaction.

"Enough for a handsome trousseau which Sam would so appreciate. There's a little of the peasant in Sam—he'd dote on having many table-cloths and pickle forks, a family Bible. He would build a square, pressed-brick house with alcoves for Boston ferns and rubber plants unless someone watched him carefully.

I'm not throwing myself upon your mercy but upon your pocketbook. I am going to tell Sam that I realize how superior he is and then surprise him by telling him about my wee *dot* saved from grandpapa's fortune. It is so remote and aristocratic sounding that Sam will never question. I'll be ready to monogram towels and get him into the country club. We'll probably build a smear of a pink stucco house on the newly opened Argyle Heights and have a futurist breakfast nook and a sporty green roadster, sets of unread books in the built-in shelves. At our Sunday night suppers we will serve cocktails instead of saying grace—not so bad? Sam will be eternally grateful as well as in love. For what more could any woman ask? Little Telva is content if only Ames is generous."

"How much do you want?" he repeated. As he asked the question he was planning to see Blair and get through the cross-examination, to be present at Valja's funeral. This thin-lipped, untidy girl's demand for "heart-balm" was as stupid as it was cheap. He recalled his mother's saying that Telva was a thoroughbred, the blood of kings in her veins! He smiled as he drew out his checkbook only to remember that it was a bankrupt institution. He had used all ready resources to safeguard Carol against Valja's enemies.

"My ring," added Telva, "can be reset in an antique design—I know the quaint shop to do it. Sam would think it was my grandmother's . . . you wouldn't want it returned? No, I thought not . . . and if you could make it ten thousand, which is modest, I could manage . . . I don't want to be hateful—but there are other ways of getting it than by asking you personally."

He ignored the last. "I haven't ten thousand dollars available."

"Have to ask mama? Hate to? Don't blame you! But she'll be all right." Telva threw politeness to the winds. She was a shrewd woman of the world playing for what she knew would be her last easy money. She had cornered Ames. Yet as she did so she realized that there was something very fine, perhaps a trifle weak, which prevented Ames's treating her as she would have advised another man to do—as Sam Russell would have done without delay or upon half the provocation. It was this fine, weak something which had bound him to Stanley and made him heroic concerning Carol. Telva almost admired Ames as she won her bargain, naming the day and the place when she should receive her compensation. She was almost ashamed at the politeness with which he met her demands. She might have wished to have loved Ames; she regretted that he must sell his car and his cherished collection of prints, other personal belongings, which would produce the needed sum . . . nice, deluded Sam, how keen he would be about Telva and her Creole *dot!*

Leaving Telva, Ames felt in need of being exorcised. It was after ten. Instead of cooling the night was more oppressive. Fog necessitated his driving like a snail. He thought in the same tempo. Ten thousand dollars . . . but a cheap price. He had better go to the studio even if Carol had urged that he stay away and rest. Blair would be there, no doubt—he must see Blair.

Blair and Carol were alone. The former opened the door grudgingly and stood looking at him with a half-smile, half-frown. Blair was not fagged as one

might have expected. He was exceptionally well groomed and energetic.

"I've persuaded her to try to sleep," he said. "I have an old party staying here to see that things are quite all right. The last of the curious were just shown out . . . Sam Russell sent a spray of pink carnations for Valja—to soften the statement that Carol was no longer connected with his firm. What do you want here, by the by? There is nothing more to be done."

"I must tell Carol something—something important," Ames began.

"She is impossible concerning important things. I've been trying to tell her some."

"This is a public hall—" as a door opposite showed signs of opening.

Blair relented. Inside the living-room Ames looked for Carol. But she was nowhere to be seen. The elderly woman in rusty black coughed harshly and then softly as if in apology. A gentle light showed Valja's withered face to have a new peace, almost an understanding. Her short white hair had been draped with lace. Her shroud suggested a nun's habit. Beside the coffin her dog Wonk whined as the men paused to look at his dead mistress.

The elderly woman coughed again—and also in apology. "If you'd like me to call the young lady," she began.

Blair shook his head. "I'll speak to her," he said as if some detail must be decided. For a moment Ames found himself alone beside Valja. Wonk wormed his way across the floor to lay a grizzled jowl on the toe of his shoe.

"She'll see you," Blair said presently. "There is so

little space in this pied-à-terre that one can hardly think—but you won't attempt it, will you?" Outside Carol's door and out of hearing of the elderly woman he paused and caught Ames's arm.

"You will go away from her?" he asked sharply.

"I shall." Ames was eager to explain. "Valja did not die in vain. She made me know how wrong I was. I was sure of that from the moment I came here and saw the tragedy, the police and public assailing Carol who was without protection. I might have made it quite as hard—one never knows. Valja played us a kindly trick in spite of herself."

"Did she?" Blair's tone became wistful as if he longed to say more. "Let me guess the finale; you will not marry Telva nor harm Carol. You will continue to be Stanley's son——"

Without answering Ames knocked and then opened the door of Carol's room with its cream-tinted walls and soft hangings. Half-packed boxes and cases were set at unexpected places. Only the graceful canopied bed, Carol's one extravagance, was undisturbed. She stood with her back to the light so that Ames did not see how worn she was until he had taken her into his arms, calling himself a fool for so doing—it would only make harder what he must say.

"I knew you would come back; poor boy, you are tired, too. What beasts they have been, the sort of cattle Valja always called them. Now I understand. I'm so tired, so eager to be away—don't let Blair frighten you, the noble old dear. So wrong himself that he wants everyone else to be extremely right. We *are* right, aren't we? Why am I suddenly uncertain of you? I've never felt uncertain in just this way. Talk to

me, hold me close, say that you won't let Blair's ranting change our plans—nor your mother's protests, that we will slip away and——”

“What of yourself? That must be faced and talked out.” He began disengaging himself.

“That is kismet.”

“I don't employ that sort of sophistry any more. Valja did; which is one reason she cheated herself of life. I won't let you give yourself to me; I can't marry you—just yet.” He despised himself for the last words, they suggested Stanley all tears and appealing green eyes. Yet to Carol he must speak the truth.

“You won't let me come with you? You mean——”

“You sha'n't throw yourself away—no man is worth it.”

“No woman is worth it,” she flashed back.

“I must get to work,” as if she had not spoken. “I have broken with Telva; I have told my mother. I have promised myself to marry no one unless it be you.”

“You have promised her,” she corrected. “Why are you so afraid? Oh, I'd rather chance our sort of love for a year than to exist for a century socially accepted but hungering within. Do you mean what you have just said?” with sudden anger. “Then I will not talk with you again. Oh, I know my mind,” as he shook his head. “I tell you I am right. Do you think that I will wait for any mother's funeral to give me the right of way to the churchyard?”

“Carol, Carol,” stroking her short flames of hair, “you refuse to understand. Blair is right—you are impossible. You are not only innocent of life—you are ignorant, a deadly combination.”

"My father—Valja—"

"What have they to do with us? We must face the conditions here and now. Be reasonable, Carol. I give you up because I love you as I have never loved you—not even twenty-four hours ago. You have already succeeded with me; I shall not marry Telva; I shall go to work. I don't call my secret hope 'waiting for a funeral.' I shall say to myself, 'Carol's love will never die—some day—somehow'— No, no, you can't discourage me. I am beginning to stand alone—oh, darling, I so wanted you!"

Abruptly he left her, turning back into that heavy atmosphered studio where the elderly party coughed at stated intervals, first harshly and then as if in apology, and where Blair tried to coax Wonk away from Valja's coffin.

"She is quite impossible, isn't she?" Blair asked in a light yet tender way.

"Quite."

"But you have told her? I can see that you have. She is going to try to hate you. It is all wrong, all needless. Someone ought to—" Blair's expression made Ames forget the personal tangle. He seemed to be thinking with him, suffering with him. "So Stanley still holds the reins?"

"Perhaps—but they are slackened ones."

Impulsively Blair shoved him from the room. "Idiot—coward—cheat," Ames heard him murmuring. He did not mind the first two terms; he had often applied them to himself. But he was not a cheat. He wanted to go back and argue it out. Only the respect due that wilful body in its white shroud precluded creating a

personal issue. Somehow the word "cheat" followed him through the night and to his absurd dreams. He half believed that Blair intended the word "idiot" for Carol and "coward" for himself but the last for someone else.

CHAPTER XXIX

VALJA'S funeral was a front-page story with streamer headlines and photographs, padded interviews with Miss Clive, the dead princess's confidante, as to what she would do. She had been offered a not unpleasing sum to write memoirs, to deliver over personal letters. Her own story was unearthed in the general game of hunt-and-find. There was a drawing of her father and a sensational account of his marriage and disappearance from the operatic world.

Not only Dalefield but the world at large "enjoyed" Valja's funeral story. Unappeased creditors were afforded some satisfaction by the reproaches and exposures to which her name was subjected. More than one gallant of a past generation read the abbreviated press dispatch in foreign papers and smiled a knowing smile indicative that his opinion of Valja might have been more accurate than that of the imaginative American press.

But a small item heading Dalefield's social calendar created far more furore. The item read:

VAN ZILE—MONROE.

After due consideration Miss Telva Monroe and Mr. Ames Van Zile have decided to dissolve their engagement which was announced some months ago.

Returning from the cemetery Blair and Carol and Ames found the respectable party with the cough

drinking a cup of tea. She was reluctant to be dismissed even if well paid.

Everything in the room seemed so quiet, Carol thought as she sat beside old Wonk. So much had ended suddenly but not in vain. Ames would have a career. What right had she to ask for more, she who talked so glibly of sacrifice, of how when one loves one must be free, unhampered? What did she know of freedom or marriage, or any of it? She felt immature, incapable of self-expression. She wished that Blair and Ames would go. She wanted to be quiet too.

Thoughts of Valja confused her thoughts of Ames, plans for her future. She must realize that she had severed her Dalefield connections as definitely as Telva had announced the breaking of her engagement. She must go away as quietly as she had told Ames that she would do should their love seem to lessen. She seemed to have lost herself in chaotic phantasy, yet the hands of the clock showed the lapse of only moments. Blair was coming back from the door where a messenger boy had handed in a note and scuttled downstairs.

"It is not about Valja," he said in answer to her nervous start. "It is from Ames's mother. I had asked her to be here when we would have returned. She regrets but cannot comply. She has Tante on her hands again. She must play martyr and fight the grim reaper—that sort of chaff"—his laugh interrupted his words—"just the note she would compose when she knew that she was being threatened. Good enough; since she is afraid to come here—we must go to her."

"Why did you wish her to be here?" Ames was more puzzled than displeased.

"To tell her something with Carol and yourself as

witnesses. Something which she should have been told long ago—only she sent notes. This time there is no chance for any one of us to escape." His gentleness was contradicted by the tenseness in his eyes.

"What use to tell her?" suggested Carol.

"That remains to be seen."

"Why drag us into your past—or hers?" Ames failed to feel indignant.

"Suspend judgment, *mes enfants*. I may have a formula for white magic that I've never yet tried." Blair had gone over to Carol's chair; he patted her shoulder in reassurance. "You two must be happy. That is a command. If Stanley is the barrier, she must remove herself . . . perhaps, after she has heard me out with you two as witnesses she may agree. Promise me that you'll not flinch, my boy. Carol, try not to be impossible." He tossed the pink note into the fireplace.

Carol rose. "Once you said that after a hundred years any scandal becomes a romance. Just now I've been thinking that after twenty-four hours any frustrated romance becomes ridiculous. Ames, you have done almost everything I have wanted to see you do. Why give Stanley another chance to beat us at our own game?"

Blair's answer was to hand her her wraps. "Is your car ready?" he asked Ames.

"I have none," said Ames slowly. He was ashamed of the fact that during the stress of the moment he found himself thinking of Telva and her announcement, the ten thousand dollars which she was to receive within the next week . . . what an admirable wife she would make Sam. Telva did not need someone whom she could love but someone to whom she

could lie! As for Blair's absurd plan—what could it matter? He was clear about the future, the only distressing moment would be if Carol weakened and he was off guard. As Carol said, he had promised "almost everything."

Blair had called a taxi and was piloting them down to the curb. The studio was empty for the first time in many hectic hours. Reporters and the morbidly curious might knock in vain.

"I can't fathom what anticlimax you are striving for," complained Ames as he found himself before his mother's house. "But isn't it rather beside the point?"

"After forty, one stops creating and begins to interpret," digressed Blair. "Give me credit for being wise enough to recognize a fool," his arm protectingly encircled Carol.

"But I can't see——" she echoed faintly.

No one answered her.

They were in the living-room of the little jewel-box. Overhead was heard the imperious tap of Tante's cane, Tante who had been summoned to become one of the family not twelve hours ago, a convenient excuse for the inability to take a consoling interest in Telva or answer the telephone condolences of her friends or obey Blair's summons. Tante was so reliable; one could always fall back upon her. From the first she had been a faithful soul, as Stanley reflected. She was bent upon convincing Tante that she was suffering from shocked nerves due to Ames's wild behavior, this girl's immoral—no, unmoral attitude, the unpleasant publicity about this beggar Russian . . . she was glad to have Tante ensconced in a guestroom, pre-

tending to be absorbed by her ills and needs. Tante was an unfailing background. Sometimes Stanley was in danger of becoming fond of her.

As she greeted the trio she comforted herself that she looked her best in the pale gray slip over flame-colored taffeta which gave an opalescent effect and brightened her faded hair. She saw that Carol's face was unpowdered and unbeknownst flushed. Her dark dress and cape made her seem like the girl who had "followed" Ames down from the north woods. So much for Carol. Ames looked at her with a smile which seemed to say, "*Mia*, he would have it out with you—whatever 'it' is. But I sha'n't change—I've given my word."

She was sure of Ames. Glancing at Blair her heart beat furiously and she found herself sitting down and asking in a tremulous voice:

"Whatever is it now? Carol, you must know how sorry I am. But under the circumstances what could I do? Ames, you seem utterly fagged—do stay home and get in shape. I sha'n't keep you waiting any longer. Blair," folding her arms across her chest in mock judicial fashion, one small satin slippers toe tapping nervously.

"These children must marry," said Blair easily.

"Just why should you——"

"Please. Don't tempt me to reply. All I ask is that you give them your consent."

"I will not marry him." Carol rose in protest, but Blair's quiet voice carried on:

"Once I thought you and I were to be married. You tricked me badly. It is beside the point to give details. I shall not tell tales on you but on myself.

All I want is your consent that Ames marry the girl he loves. It is the absurd yet essential open sesame. You have fooled him as you have fooled me. To go back some years: after you tricked me I turned to Donna," his voice uncertain, jerky. "I took everything from her just as he would have done. She gave too generously—just as Carol has offered. The end of that kind of bargain is everlasting ruin and remorse. Moreover, Donna bore me a son and then died—you never suspected that, did you? I gave the child away—I don't know to whom. I wanted neither to look at it nor hear its cry. Yet he has haunted me as much as Donna's memory. You were half to blame, you beautiful, insincere little beast . . . yet you tell your son the same soft lies and exact the same unfair promises—and why? To keep yourself supreme, to dominate, and then what? But you don't admit that the mediocre fate of age and inability can finally reach you——"

"Are you mad?" interrupted Stanley, "or are you trying to blackmail me? What have you put him up to?" turning to Carol. "Give my consent? Never . . . never . . . Have him marry you? This same hour if he likes but he ceases to be my son. What right have you"—turning to Blair—"to come here with your lies and your sins and try to——"

Tap—tap—tap. Not the younger generation knocking at the door but the solemn rap of the past generation slowly descending the stairs. It was Tante whose cane must find and test each step before her uncertain feet attempted progress.

Stanley ran towards her: Tante was coming to the rescue. Her keen ears had overheard, purposely or otherwise—what did it matter? She was coming to

stand beside Stanley and protect her. Stanley felt as great an admiration for Tante's courage as she had contempt for her gullibility. Whatever Tante said would be believed. In an emotional flurry she turned to her as if she would prevent her being drawn to the scene.

But Tante paid scant attention. Her stooped figure in its gray gown, her broad, honest face, the withered throat with its muscles working from excitement, and the whitish film across her eyes suggested the one fairy who had not been invited to the princess's christening but who appeared later on without warning.

She was looking at Blair. She crossed the room to stand before him, her cane tapping imperiously on the ground to serve as punctuation for her broken, querulous sentences.

"Your voice carries—should have stayed on the stage," she began with a childish delight in mixing the tragic with the commonplace. "Excellent voice—heard every word—spoiled my nap. What's all this about Stanley and consent—marriage to this girl here?" The filmed yet kindly eyes regarding Carol briefly. "Nice girl—always said so . . . always wanted her to find a nice boy. . . ." It was Ames's turn to be inspected. "He is a nice boy if he's let alone . . . she'll have a big job if she does marry him. But she'll have greater regrets if she doesn't," chuckling at her philosophical prophecy.

"Tante dearest." Stanley rushed to her side.

"Not delirious—not senile decay. Truth must be told. Always meant to tell it when the right time came. This is the time. All rubbish about Telva's father's affair with Stanley—that's past and done—nobody

cares. Nobody cares after you're middle-aged—unless the will is drawn in their favor! I know." Her withered throat worked nervously. "Always tried to be a friend to Stanley," with a thump of her cane to quiet Stanley's exclamation.

"Let the past be the past. No need to go on the rack, Blair. Stanley has borne no living child, has no living child, has no right either to give or to withhold consent. Made a great idiot of yourself with her—and the woman who died—this boy's mother," pointing her cane at Ames. "Not delirious—not senile decay," waving them away again. "Got the papers in my box. Van Zile trusted me. Stanley's second child died, and Van Zile was afraid she'd lose her mind if she knew it. Always used to getting what she wanted," with a grim chuckle. "She wanted a son—had a bad spine so she couldn't have risked a third try. Fooled her by adopting a child—your boy, this boy," pointing towards Ames. "He was born the night before—his mother died—you played the shirk and signed away your rights to him. Didn't dream that you were giving him to her." Both power and reproach in the cracked voice as Blair's face whitened. "Nobody knew except myself . . . always meant to leave a letter. Then this nice girl (only she cut her hair too short) came along and fell in love with him. Stanley had trumped up Telva, that diplomatic baggage; thought I'd tell then but Ames seemed such a stupid young ass that I wondered if the truth would help. Let it ride along—but got the papers in my box . . ."

She paused. This time no one exclaimed nor tried to interfere. Triumphantly, she resumed: "You will believe the papers if you doubt me for a ranting busy-

body. . . . Stanley took your son, worshiped and loved and ruined him. Good enough for you, Stanley, to have had a trick played upon you for once. Good enough for you, Blair, to have given your son to your enemy. Now nice girl, come here—so—stand there and give me your hand . . . Ames, stand there—listen: Once I loved someone who only pitied me and let me do thankless tasks. . . . I know what love-hunger is—what it can do. Ames, you belong to yourself. Carol, you ought to belong to Ames . . . a lot of rumpus for one old lady to create. Never been the center of such drama in my life! Stanley'll collapse—Blair'll get drunk. You two get married and be quick about it. Don't hate me and don't thank me . . . oh"—with a wince of pain—"good Lord, where's my electric knee pad?"

In the moments that followed it was Blair and Ames who turned to find each other—not Ames and Carol. With a despairing gesture Stanley thrust herself between them before either could speak a syllable of recognition or blame. She was making some gigantic effort—not regarding Blair, but Ames. It was neither renunciation nor grief, but was trying to summon some ugly emotion which proved as still-born as had been her sons.

In that instant she knew that Tante had spoken only the unwelcome truth just as she realized that she had loved and idolized Donna Lovell's son. This sober-faced, grave-eyed boy whose hand stretched out towards Blair's was nothing but a stranger. She had been tricked, she, whose life had consisted of a series of clever tricks with the joy of laughing after they had been successfully executed! Ames was her enemy,

someone to destroy rather than dominate. In humiliated anger she wondered if she ought not to save Carol from marrying him; she had always admired the girl even as she feared her. She must prove what an addled sort her lover was—illegitimate son of a too ardent tragedienne and a careless rounder . . . Carol would be worthy of such an effort. There was vindictiveness in her heart towards Tante, who hobbled upstairs with Carol's aid. She was glad the girl was out of the room until she could have her first blow at Ames. She would reverse the situation, make Carol her ward, companion, devoted daughter . . . she would see that she was disillusioned as well. It would be easy to do this, to "love her new Perk" as Tante might have said.

Arriving at this decision she looked up to see Ames watching her half in pity, half in rebellion. "*Mia*," escaped from his lips, "I'm so sorry—but I understand—"

Then she knew that defeat was final. Try as she would she could not hate him. Truth, the thing she had evaded and denied all of her life, had found her out. Tap—tap—tap went Tante's ugly stick on the floor above. She was settled back in her chair, no doubt. Carol would be coming back, Carol who had the right to marry Ames and who would despise her for the rest of her days, whose children would despise her. At this moment Stanley realized what loving Ames could mean!

Her eyes turned dull. For the first time in the fox woman's life she fainted honestly!

CHAPTER XXX

LATE the next afternoon Stanley admitted Blair into her morning-room. Tante had been sent off to a nursing-home. Although there was no further havoc to create she was an annoying reminder of what had just been done. Until she had got herself well in hand or become seriously ill, Stanley wanted Tante out of sight and sound.

No one but Blair had tried to see her. That morning he had sent word asking her to give him a few moments. There was no point in refusal. Only Blair could give her news of Ames whom she had just discovered that she loved and of Carol whom she feared yet respected.

"You are very kind," she began meekly as he hesitated in the doorway.

"Anyone is temporarily kind if one is hit by a trolley car," was his flippant retort.

"I'm hardly myself." She made an attempt to stir among the cushions of her chaise longue. She felt at this particular moment more sullen and bankrupt than broken-hearted. It had hardly been worth the effort to wear a delicate old rose satin négligé with a necklace of coral for contrast. Force of habit had made her dress carefully, wondering as she did so how one would live through empty, aging years. How beside the point

seemed clothes and jewelry, cosmetics, good-looking furnishings, admiring servants. Perhaps there was something rather genuine about herself, after all!

"They've married and gone," announced Blair, coming in and drawing up a chair beside the chaise longue.

"Do you really mean—"

"I do. At eleven—the same church in which you married Van Zile." It was only human to have added this last. "They will be back in a few days and you'll see them briefly. Then New York and their real life will begin." He handed her a letter which Ames had addressed.

She fidgeted, pretending that emotion precluded its reading. With a dry smile Blair turned to her desk to unearth her lorgnette.

"That will be better, will it not?" he murmured.

Stanley's flush equaled the tint of her coral necklace. There was no gainsaying that she was now able to read the lines:

MIA:

We are sorry for all of it. We will be back for a day or so next week and perhaps we can talk with understanding and sympathy. We intend to try. Please, please believe in Blair.

It was signed both by Carol's firm, round hand and Ames's careless flourish.

So this was to be the end: to come back for a day and forgivingly discipline her. And she must believe in Blair.

Tears blurred the vision which the lorgnette had

made possible. She dropped both note and glasses and put trembling, ringless little fingers to her face.

"There is only one thing for us to do—clear out," said Blair crisply. "You are alone and found out. I am adrift and superfluous. My boy—your boy—after all, *our* boy has been precious to you and I turned my back upon him from the first. He will come back to us as Carol's husband. Thank God for Carol, say I in the next breath. But he is gone; there is nothing ahead for us and so much that is behind. You can't deny that you have cheated and lied, while I have hated and shirked—and that Ames is '*our*' boy. Ironical, isn't it? Now try to let me have my own way for once," but there was the suggestion of sacrifice in Blair's voice and expression.

He had thought it out during the night and in the early morning when he had witnessed Carol's marriage to his son. Someone must remove Stanley from their horizon. She was too clever and uncertain to be left near at hand. She might decide not to step aside as easily as she now fancied that she would. She would begin haunting Ames since she could no longer dominate him. Someone must divert her attention, flatter, amuse and, in one sense, control her. It was up to Blair—his last rôle, which he must play with all his gallantry and talent. Moreover, when he had listened to Carol's logical vituperation of Stanley and, incidentally, himself, he found that he could not quite hate Stanley. Like faint perfume from an old rose jar there lingered a mental aroma of romance and charm. Fraud, fibber, neurotic, mercenary tyrant that she was, her charm and her luck held to the end. She still found

someone for whom she could "fox." Out of the wreckage, Blair rose and offered himself. It would simplify things for his boy, pay back, in a small measure, the neglect of those first years.

"Whatever can you be meaning?" The bright, shining light began to show in her eyes; her hand, scented with magnolia, rested upon Blair's cold fingers.

"We must marry and go away for a time—give these young things a clear field for action. Let me take care of you, Stanley. I understand you—doesn't that count for something? You can either be natural with me or be the fascinating pretender, just as you like. You can use lorgnettes or spectacles, wear ivory satin or flannel Mother Hubbards buttoned tight around the neck—it will be quite the same. I know you." It was as well to warn her at the outset—a tiny sop to his bruised heart. "I neither adore nor trust you, yet I want to marry you."

"Then you must have forgiven me, this poor, silly little me. I've always cared, even hoped." How exquisitely she rose to the part. "But are you quite sure?"

"Quite. We must marry but let us not try to be in love. Rather comfortable at our age, don't you agree?"

"I'm not sure but what I am in love——" She was thinking what a graceful retreat this afforded her. Tante in a nursing-home, good old Tante, after all—Blair and herself traveling leisurely on the Continent with May spent in London. She could refer to her married son and to her lovely daughter-in-law, be proud of Blair's distinguished white hair and vibrant voice even when ordering dinners. She could write in-

teresting, self-sacrificing letters to Ames and send Carol beautiful trifles from Paris. Sometimes they could come back and Ames's children would find in her a dotting, story-book grandmother. Perhaps Carol would not mind her toying with them for a few weeks. (She would bring them such wonderful clothes and make such a generous will.) All the time she would have someone who understood her moods and knew her past, as well as appreciated her abilities. Blair would be ready to pick up her fan whenever she ordered him to; in time he would become docile and rather fussy about draughts and diets. No matter how bravely he might speak now she was content to bide her time. They would make pleasant contacts and she could reminisce inaccurately but romantically—yes, it might be best to marry this Blair . . . moreover he would not be too expensive!

She smothered a tiny yawn to her own amazement; she felt hungry, sleepy—she wanted to be "at ease" now that her future was secure. How good of her to marry this renegade, what a concession! She was removing Blair from Ames's life. He might have become annoying. She felt supreme in this last sacrifice.

"You are not sure?" Blair was amused that she sparred for time when he knew that inwardly she was rejoicing because he had offered what was left of his life to do with as she wished.

"I'm not sure," her underlip quivering, her eyes very bright. "Still, Ames wanted me to believe in you—and so—so—I—will."

Slowly, unemotionally Blair lifted her hand to his lips.

It was good to be alive, about to marry a Blair

and go back to the old world to play more appealing, graceful tricks. This settled, Stanley mentally relaxed. She could turn to lesser affairs. As Blair bent to kiss her fingers she made mental note of a threatening bald spot; she must see that he began with tonic!

THE END

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